i've been through the desert on a horse with no name

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/52898890.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter, Original Characters
Additional Tags:	Alternate Universe - Western, Country & Western, Alternate Universe - Zombie Apocalypse, Zombie Apocalypse, Cowboys & Cowgirls, Southern Will Graham, Cowboy Will Graham, Cowboy Hannibal Lecter, Dark Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter is a Cannibal, Murder, Zombies, Western, Denial of Feelings, Enemies to Lovers, Cowboy Hats, Sassy Will Graham, Hannibal Lecter Loves Will Graham, Will Graham Loves Hannibal Lecter, Bickering, Morally Grey Will Graham, Tenderness, Bandits & Outlaws, Blood and Torture, Interrogation, Submission, Power Play, Light Bondage, Smitten Hannibal Lecter, Tender Sex, Will Graham is Bad at Feelings, Scars, Fluff and Mush, Grumpy Old Men, Blood and Violence, Feral Will Graham, Possessive Behavior, Body Worship, Explicit Sexual Content, Happy Ending
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of bambbii44's hannibal cowboy au, Part 1 of bambbii44's zombie au
Stats:	Published: 2024-01-08 Completed: 2024-02-13 Words: 101,748 Chapters: 14/14

i've been through the desert on a horse with no name

by bambbii44

Summary

Will's seasoned boots gripped the stirrups as he guided his horse through the desolate expanse. The hat's brim shielded his gaze, but even the shadows couldn't hide the vigilance etched into his face. A rhythmic creak accompanied the journey, a serenade of saddle leather harmonizing with the ceaseless pounding of the sun. It was 1845, a frontier stained by a curse darker than a stormy night—the plague of the undead.

- or -

A Hannigram zombie apocalypse AU in the Wild West.

Notes

This story is inspired by The Last of Us as well as Cormac Mccarthy's writing style because I am a huge fan!

Title is from "A Horse with No Name" by America
Accompanying Playlist
for anyone who would like to listen :3

Enjoy! <3

Chapter 1

Beneath the relentless sun of the Wild West, where the heat could blister a man's resolve quicker than a rattlesnake's strike, there rode a solitary cowboy by the name of Will Graham. The dust stirred by his horse's hooves waltzed with the arid winds, composing a gritty melody that echoed the relentless march of time. His weathered hat cast a shadow over steely eyes, shielding them from the unforgiving rays. The yearning for shade mirrored the unquenchable thirst of the land, stretching out in all directions—merciless and vast.

Will's seasoned boots gripped the stirrups as he guided his horse through the desolate expanse. The hat's brim shielded his gaze, but even the shadows couldn't hide the vigilance etched into his face. A rhythmic creak accompanied the journey, a serenade of saddle leather harmonizing with the ceaseless pounding of the sun. It was 1845, a frontier stained by a curse darker than a stormy night—the plague of the undead.

Walkers, Will called them, though defining these abominations proved more elusive than catching a phantom on the wind. Ugly, horrible, and hungry, the infected roamed the land like spectral riders, scavenging for the remnants of life. Years had passed since the outbreak's onset, reducing once-thriving towns to ruins, their streets and saloons now echoing with the ghostly whispers of the past.

Will, a man of the land, had weathered the storm like an ancient oak standing steadfast against the relentless winds. His existence unfolded like a solitary tumbleweed drifting through the ghost town of life. It wasn't just the living dead that rendered the West a wasteland; it was the emptiness that lingered—a haunting void left by the fading echoes of laughter and the ring of spurs, now replaced by the mournful howls of the wind and the distant moans of the undead.

Alone in this forsaken land, Will's life had become a somber dance with the horizon, a two-step with the setting sun. He was kinless, a lone rider with no compadres to share a fireside tale or clink glasses with under the starlit sky. In this unforgiving terrain, alliances were as scarce as water in a drought, and trust had become a currency long devalued.

Will had grown adept at distinguishing the living from the dead, an art as vital as tracking a lone coyote through the moonlit night. The infected were relentless, but he had mastered their ways—how to avoid them, how to put them down when necessity called. His Colt rested easy in its holster, a silent witness to a man who had become one with the apocalypse.

Yet, Will remained a nameless wanderer, a man with no past and a future as unpredictable as the gambler's luck. His encounters with the living were fleeting, like a tumbleweed brushing against a wooden fence before rolling off into the vast unknown. He seldom allowed them to live long enough to learn his name, a precautionary measure in a world where trust was a liability and betrayal could mean a bullet in the back.

The towns, skeletal remains of their former selves, stood like sentinels marking the passage of time. Wooden structures, weathered by the elements and the decay of civilization, whispered tales of a time when life flowed through the streets like a mighty river. Will couldn't help but wonder if the land itself mourned the loss of its vibrancy, the spirit of the West extinguished by the insatiable hunger of the undead.

In his lonesome journey, Will encountered remnants of a once-thriving civilization—a dilapidated church with a broken steeple, a saloon with swinging doors that creaked in the wind, and a graveyard where the dead rested in undisturbed slumber. Each place held echoes of a world that had crumbled, and Will rode through them like a spectral apparition, a phantom drifting through the memories of a once-vibrant existence.

The blistering heat of the day yielded to the cool embrace of the night, but there was no solace in the darkness. The infected, driven by some primal instinct, roamed the land with an insatiable appetite for flesh. The moon cast an eerie glow on their twisted forms, turning them into grotesque shadows that danced in the pale light.

Will knew the night held its own dangers. The infected were more active under the cover of darkness, their senses heightened by the absence of the blistering sun. The soft shuffle of their footsteps and the guttural moans filled the air, creating a cacophony of dread.

His campfires were modest, the flames flickering like the dying embers of hope. The smell of charred wood mingled with the metallic tang of gun oil as Will cleaned his Colt—a ritual as familiar as the rising sun. The firelight painted his face with flickering shadows, highlighting the weariness etched into his features—the lines of a man who had seen too much, carried burdens too heavy for any one soul to bear.

There were moments when he questioned the purpose of his journey, the reason for clinging to a life that seemed to have little meaning. But in the quiet solitude of the night, as the

embers of his campfire whispered their secrets to the wind, Will felt a sense of duty—a duty to survive, to endure, and maybe, in some distant corner of his heart, a duty to remember.

The days blurred into one another, a relentless cycle of riding, surviving, and killing. Will's horse carried him through the unforgiving terrain with a loyalty forged in the crucible of survival.

Through canyons and across rivers, over plains and through the remnants of forgotten towns, Will's journey continued. His path was as unpredictable as the wind, guided by instinct and a silent determination to navigate the twisted maze of the undead-infested West.

Occasionally, the silhouette of a distant figure would appear on the horizon—a lone wanderer, a survivor like himself. The decision to approach or evade was delicate, a gamble with consequences as unpredictable as a roll of the dice. Trust was a rare commodity and Will chose solitude over the uncertainty of alliances.

The infected, however, were a more straightforward foe. Will had honed his skills in dealing with them. His movements were deliberate, his senses finely tuned to the subtle signs of their presence. His knife, an extension of his will, sliced with deadly precision.

Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. The changing seasons were marked not by the vibrant hues of fall or the blossoms of spring but by the subtle shifts in the air, the whispers of a world in perpetual decay. Will's journey had become a pilgrimage, a quest for survival in a land where life clung to existence like the last ember in a dying fire.

In the heart of a ghost town, where the sun bowed low on the horizon and shadows played tricks in the deserted saloon, Will walked through the timeworn building. His spurs clinked like a mournful ballad as he moved, hat pulled low, blue eyes shaded by the brim. His Bowie knife, sharp as a coyote's howl, hung at his hip.

The saloon, a mere echo of nights filled with laughter and the clink of glasses, watched Will's deliberate steps. The dust stirred in protest, hanging in the air like the ghosts of better days.

Sunlight, strained through boarded-up windows, revealed the decay etched into every inch of the place.

Will's eyes, keen as a rattlesnake's, scanned the dimly lit interior. The Bowie knife, a relic of countless showdowns, whispered tales of survival etched into its worn blade. The remnants of overturned furniture spoke of a history marked by the unforgiving dance with fate.

A subtle disturbance reached Will's senses, the soft creak of floorboards betraying the presence of an unwelcome guest. His hand, calloused and unyielding, found the familiar hilt of the Bowie knife. With the fluidity of a man who'd stared down danger one too many times, he turned, eyes narrowing as they focused on a figure emerging from the shadows—a stranger in Will's domain, a trespasser.

The Bowie knife slid from its sheath, catching the muted light as it found its place in Will's grip. His voice, rough as a canyon breeze, shattered the silence like a bullet. "What the hell are you doin' followin' me here, stranger?"

The man, hat pulled low and the weight of the frontier etched on his weathered face, raised his hands in surrender. His words, thick as molasses with the twang of the open range, flowed forth. "I ain't followin' nobody, mister. Just lookin' for a bit of shelter, reckon."

Will's gaze bore into the stranger, eyes as unyielding as the rocky terrain he'd traversed. "Shelter? You must think folks are plumb crazy to believe that. Now, tell me true, why are you trailin' me?"

The man's eyes widened, and a stammered breath escaped his lips. "I swear on my mama's grave, I don't know you from Adam. I'm just tryin' to survive, same as you."

Will's face remained carved from stone, the Bowie knife gleaming in the dim light. "You expect me to believe that?"

The man's pleas spilled forth, desperation mingling with fear in the echoes of the empty saloon. "Mister, I ain't got no reason to harm ya. I'm just tryin' to stay breathin' in this godforsaken land. I swear it."

Will's face remained unmoved, the Bowie knife a silent promise in his hand. "Words are cheap, stranger. Actions, now, they speak louder. Why should I trust a man who's been doggin' my trail?"

The man's eyes darted, seeking salvation in the shadows. "Mister, I beg ya. I ain't meanin' no harm. I just—"

The plea hung in the air, cut short by the unmistakable sight of the Bowie knife moving closer. Will's face remained stoic. "Beggin' don't change the fact that you're treadin' on dangerous ground, friend."

The man's desperation deepened, his pleas now a torrent of words rushing forth like a river in spate. "Please, mister! I got a family, young'uns who ain't seen a decent meal in weeks. I just wanted a bit of whatever this place might offer. I didn't know it was your turf. I swear, if you let me go, I'll head the other way. I won't cross your path again."

Will's face remained unchanged, the Bowie knife steady in his hand. The decision hung in the air like the scent of sagebrush after a storm, a choice between mercy and the stark reality of survival.

The man's pleas turned to desperate sobs, his voice cracking with a raw vulnerability that mirrored the harshness of life in the unforgiving West. "Mister, please. I ain't lookin' for trouble. Don't let it end like this."

Will's resolve remained unyielding, the weight of the decision settling over the saloon like a shroud. The blade descended with a swift, merciless stroke.

The reality of his choice reverberated through the saloon, the sound of a life extinguished in the blink of an eye. Will's face remained stoic, the Bowie knife returning to its sheath with the ease of a man who had become judge, jury, and executioner in a world gone mad. Will sighed.

The man down at his feet was nothing more than dust in the wind—a trespasser in a realm where the living and the dead walked a thin line. Will's eyes, colder than the steel at his hip, glanced not at the remains but at the desolation that surrounded him.

The impending threat of walkers, drawn by the scent of fresh blood, was a matter of passing concern to Will. He moved with the quiet assurance of a wolf prowling the desert night, scavenging through the bones of a once-lively establishment.

His hands sifted through the debris of a bygone era, collecting the artifacts of a world that had crumbled like ancient parchment. The spurs on his boots echoed the cadence of his quest, a symphony of survival in the emptiness of a silent town.

A flask of whiskey, untarnished by the decay that surrounded it, met the approval of Will's calculating gaze. It joined the array of items at his side, not as a luxury but as a pragmatic choice—a remedy for wounds, be they inflicted on man or beast. Whiskey was a salve for the physical, a tool in the arsenal of a man who harbored no illusions.

His unfeeling eyes, scanning the desolate space, caught the sight of a crumpled wanted poster clinging to the saloon wall. The image, worn and faded, depicted a face weathered by the relentless sweep of time. Will's tilted head, a subtle acknowledgment of curiosity, betrayed nothing of sentiment.

The wanted poster held no sway over Will's stoic demeanor. The face portrayed, a phantom from the past, stirred no emotions within him. His fingers traced the lines of the poster, not with fond recollection but with the detached scrutiny of a man studying the etchings in a canyon wall.

With a heavy exhale, Will tore his gaze away from the faded image and pressed on through the shadows.

The saloon receded into the distance as Will stepped into the unforgiving daylight. His horse, a creature as stoic as its rider, stood waiting. Will swung himself onto the saddle, the leather creaking in harmony with the distant howls of the wind.

No backward glance marked his departure. The abandoned town, with its crumbling buildings and silent echoes of days long gone, meant nothing to him. A man of the frontier had no time for sentimentality, and Will Graham was a ghost.

The Colt at his side, the flask of whiskey snug in his coat, and the scavenged items tied to his horse—the cowboy had what he needed. The world beyond the horizon called, and Will answered with the steady gallop of hooves on dusty trails.

The silence of the West enveloped him as he rode, the rhythmic beat of the horse's gait setting the pace for a journey untold. The day, with its merciless brilliance, held no sway over Will's purpose.

As he passed by the dried corpses of walkers, Will's gaze, cold as the steel at his side, rested on the hollow remains. The emptied rib cages, the weathered and rotted skin—these were the echoes of life reduced to mere survival, a state of existence that Will knew all too well.

He reined in his horse, the leather reins pulled taut in his steady grip. The creatures, once human, now lay scattered like forgotten relics.

His eyes lingered on the empty rib cages—a stark reminder of the hollowness that echoed within him. In a world where emotions were a luxury reserved for the foolish, Will rode on, a man with no room for sentiment or reflection. The desolation of the landscape mirrored the emptiness within him, a void as vast as the endless prairie stretching out before him.

The horse beneath him shifted, an unspoken acknowledgment of the rider's urging. With a gentle nudge of his boots, Will pressed on, the rhythmic drumming of hooves resuming. The day unfolded like a vast canvas, the sun beating down on the solitary cowboy and his steadfast companion.

Survival, an unyielding mantra etched into the very fabric of Will's being, eclipsed all other thoughts. The land, scorched by the harshness of an unforgiving sun, yielded no reprieve. The remnants of a once-civilized world now lay abandoned.

Will's eyes, sharp and unyielding, scanned the horizon—a man on a perpetual quest, moving forward without the anchor of the past.

The day wore on, the relentless sun casting long shadows that danced in rhythm with the cowboy's progress. Will's mind, a fortress of stoicism, held no room for introspection. The landscape shifted like a mirage, a never-ending expanse of emptiness, and the cowboy rode on—undaunted, unfeeling

Survival was etched into the very sinews of Will's existence. The horse, a creature as enduring as its rider, pressed forward with the unspoken understanding that in this world, the fittest endured, and sentimentality was a luxury reserved for those who dared not tread the harsh trails of the unforgiving frontier.

His hat, weathered and worn, hung low over his sharp blue eyes, shielding them from the relentless glare of the sun. The air shimmered with the oppressive heat, distorting the distant horizon into a wavering mirage. Will's gaze scanned the barren terrain as if searching for something elusive in the vast emptiness.

Adjusting the bandana that clung to his neck, Will shifted in the saddle. The leather creaked beneath him, the only sound breaking the oppressive silence that enveloped the wilderness. The bandana, worn from countless journeys through sun and wind, offered little reprieve from the unrelenting heat.

With a practiced motion, Will pulled out his knife. The handle, worn smooth from years of use, nestled comfortably in his calloused grip. The cowboy's fingers traced the blade's edge, an acknowledgment of the tool's familiarity.

The sun beat down mercilessly as Will raised the knife, the gleaming steel catching the sunlight. With a quick and precise motion, he threw the knife, the blade sailing through the air with the controlled grace of a hawk in flight. The imaginary target on the sun-baked ground awaited its fate.

The curse that escaped Will's lips was as dry as the dust that clung to the leather of his boots. The knife had missed its mark, embedding itself in the unforgiving earth a few feet from the intended spot. Without a hint of frustration, Will hopped off his horse and strode forward to retrieve the errant weapon.

The cowboy's movements were deliberate, each step a testament to the rugged efficiency that defined his existence. He reached down and yanked the knife from the ground, the blade emerging with a whisper of resistance. Will's expression remained unchanged, his face a mask of stoicism as he assessed the distance and angle of his failed throw.

With a low growl of dissatisfaction, Will repeated the action. The knife, propelled by the strength and precision of a man who had honed his skills through countless trials, sailed through the air once more. This time, the blade struck true, embedding itself in the sun-scorched ground with a satisfying thud.

A flicker of acknowledgment crossed Will's eyes. He retrieved the knife with a silent efficiency, his movements a ballet of practiced grace.

Satisfied with the second attempt, Will sheathed his knife with a fluid motion. The leather creaked as the blade found its resting place, nestled against the worn holster on his hip. The sun, unyielding in its intensity, cast long shadows that danced across the arid landscape.

Pulling off his hat, Will ran a hand through his curls. The tousled locks, kissed by the relentless sun and winds of the West, fell in disarray over his forehead. His sharp blue eyes, momentarily revealed, surveyed the horizon.

The heat radiated from the earth in waves, distorting the air like a fevered dream. Will's gaze, as piercing as the noonday sun, seemed to penetrate the very essence of the land he traversed.

The wind, a whispering companion in the vast emptiness, stirred the dust at Will's feet. He replaced his hat, the brim casting a shadow over his features once more.

The night was black as pitch, stars hanging like diamonds in the vast canvas above. Will ay still in his makeshift camp. The dying embers of a campfire cast flickering shadows that danced in the quiet of the night.

A sudden wail ripped through the silence, yanking Will from the clutches of slumber. His eyes snapped open, pupils adjusting to the night. The eerie lamentation, a ghostly echo of the living dead, reverberated through the stillness. Will cursed under his breath, a grumble as low as the rumble of distant thunder.

Swift as the draw of a Colt at high noon, Will's hand gripped the hilt of his knife. The moonlight kissed the blade as he rose from his makeshift bed, ready to face the nocturnal intruder. The wail drew closer, a haunting melody heralding the arrival of a creature untouched by the mercy of death.

Emerging from the shadows, a walker stumbled into the camp, its rotted visage a macabre sight under the moon's pale glow. Will's face, eternally etched in stoicism, contorted into a scowl of annoyance. The Colt, resting peacefully in its holster, played second fiddle to the silent dance between man and monster.

The knife, gleaming like the devil's grin, met the creature's lunge with a sidestep as deft as a rattlesnake's strike. The walker, a puppet in the cruel theater of the night, grasped at empty air. Will seized the moment, his knife finding its mark—a ruthless thrust into the creature's eye socket.

The wail, now reduced to a guttural moan, echoed through the night as the walker crumpled to the ground. Will cursed again, giving the lifeless form a dismissive kick. "Couldn't let a man have a decent night's sleep, could ya?" he grumbled, his words lost to the vast expanse of the wilderness.

Checking his horse, Will found the creature unruffled by the nocturnal disturbance. "Good girl," he muttered, a gruff praise as he ran a calloused hand along the mare's mane. The horse, a creature wise to the ways of the wilderness, acknowledged his presence with a nudge.

Shaking his head, Will mounted with the practiced ease of a man born in the saddle. The night, once a refuge, had lost its appeal. "Time to find a new place to rest," he muttered, discontent riding alongside him like a shadow.

As the moon hung high, bathing the land in a spectral glow, Will and his horse moved into the dark unknown. The trail, winding through the wilderness like a serpent's path, beckoned them forward. "No rest for the wicked, ain't that right, girl?"

Chapter 2

A rustle in the dry grass alerted Will to an intruder on the prairie stage. Quick as a striking rattler, his hand found the comforting weight of his Colt. The cowboy's eyes narrowed, scanning the ground for the source of the disturbance. Then, with a suddenness that mirrored the strike of a sidewinder, a sinuous form unveiled itself—a snake, coiled and poised to strike.

Will's lips curled in a quiet curse. Damn snakes, he thought, a sentiment shared by many a cowboy who'd tangled with the slithering nuisances of the frontier. Without hesitation, he lifted his boot and brought it down hard on the serpent's head. The creature writhed beneath the unforgiving sole, its hiss replaced by the muttered curses of a man annoyed by the unpredictability of the prairie's denizens.

The cowboy grunted as the snake met its end. The sun, relentless in its vigil, bore witness to the swift and decisive conclusion of the encounter. Will smeared his boot on the ground, as if erasing the stain of the serpentine intrusion on his journey through the wild.

"Damn snakes," he muttered again, spitting on the sun-baked earth in disdain. Adjusting the bandana around his neck—a weathered strip of fabric that had seen more dust than a cattle trail—Will sighed. The prairie, indifferent to the cowboy's sentiments, stretched out in all directions.

Approaching his horse, Will's demeanor softened as he patted the creature's mane. "Guess we got a bone to pick with them snakes, huh?" he mused, sharing his bemusement with the four-legged companion. The horse nuzzled against Will's hand.

With a swift motion, Will mounted his horse. The sun, now casting long shadows across the prairie, witnessed the cowboy's departure into the ever-expansive wilderness.

The town stood silent under the unforgiving sun, its desolation echoing through the hollow streets. Will entered the deserted settlement with the steady clop of his horse's hooves.

As Will passed through the skeletal remnants of civilization, he couldn't ignore the conspicuous presence of fresh corpses sprawled across the dusty ground. He squinted down at them from beneath the brim of his hat, the sharp blue eyes registering the gruesome scene. His horse, sensing the eerie stillness, moved cautiously beneath him.

The bodies lay motionless, silent witnesses to an unknown horror. Will's gaze narrowed, suspicion etching lines on his face. He scanned the lifeless forms, noting with a discerning eye the wounds that marred their throats. Bitten off, he reckoned, by some savage force. The cowboy pulled on the reins, bringing his horse to a halt, and listened for any sign of the dead that might still roam.

But only silence greeted him.

He squinted out into the distance, the sun casting long shadows across the ghostly town. A decision hung in the air, a choice that would determine the course of the cowboy's journey. After a moment's contemplation, he dismounted, the leather creaking beneath him, and tethered his horse to a post.

The dusty ground crunched under Will's boots as he approached the lifeless bodies, his hand resting on the handle of his knife. He crouched beside the corpses, eyes scanning the telltale signs of a brutal demise. The trail of blood, vivid against the pale dirt, drew his attention.

With a furrowed brow, Will followed the path of death through the deserted streets. The macabre journey led him to the entrance of an abandoned hotel—a structure that, like the town itself, seemed frozen in time. Splashes of blood adorned its facade, a morbid tapestry that hinted at the violence within.

The cowboy stepped over the threshold, the creaking of the door punctuating the eerie silence. The interior of the hotel, once a haven for weary travelers, now bore witness to a massacre. Pools of blood adorned the floor like morose reflections of a savage ballet. Will's eyes darted around, his senses heightened as he listened for any sign of life.

The creak of his footsteps echoed through the hollow corridors, each step a somber note in the ghostly symphony of death. Will's gaze swept over the carnage, his face a mask of indifference. He followed the trail further into the depths of the building, the shadows playing tricks on his perception.

As he walked, a peculiar sensation crept over him—a subtle awareness that he wasn't alone. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled with an instinctual warning. Will halted, his hand tightening around the hilt of his knife. He listened intently, the silence broken only by the whisper of the wind through shattered windows.

A sudden movement, a spectral presence emerging from the shadows. Before Will could react, an arm coiled around his neck, constricting like a viper's embrace. The cold steel of a knife pressed against his jugular, a threat poised to extinguish the life from the cowboy.

Will, devoid of fear or surprise, began to decipher the unspoken language of the scene.

The knife at his jugular spoke of desperation, a survival instinct pushed to its limits. The figure behind him, shrouded in darkness, held a story written in blood and whispered in the hallowed corridors of the hotel. Will's face remained impassive, his senses attuned to the balance of power that hung in the air.

"You're treading on dangerous ground, stranger," Will hissed, the words laced with a venom that matched the bite of a snake. Will's jaw clenched, his gaze unyielding.

Will stood frozen, the grip of the stranger's arm around his neck like a noose of uncertainty. A deep, foreign-accented voice, a serpent's hiss in the stillness, slithered into Will's ear.

"Have you come to save your men?" the stranger spoke, the words carrying the weight of an impending storm. The cowboy, unyielding beneath the stranger's grasp, scoffed in response.

"I ain't got any fuckin' men," Will retorted, his voice rough as the winds that swept across the desolate frontier.

The pressure around his throat lessened, a momentary lapse in the stranger's grip. Will seized the opportunity with swift precision, overpowering the man in a move that echoed the primal struggle of the untamed West. Dodging the incoming hits, the cowboy tackled the stranger, the dust of the hotel floor billowing around them as they grappled.

In the chaotic struggle, Will found himself on top, his knife pressed against the stranger's jugular. The man, defiant even in defeat, bore bloody teeth in a snarl. Will, breathing heavily, cursed the stranger.

“What’s your damn name?” Will said, the grip on his knife leaving him white knuckled. “Hannibal.” Came the reply, the syllables said through gritted teeth.

"Tell me why shouldn't I just kill you now." the cowboy demanded, his gaze unwavering. The stranger, now revealed as Hannibal, breathed heavily beneath Will, his throat almost rising to meet the cold edge of the blade.

Hannibal took a measured breath before offering an explanation. "These are no men. They are pig, swine, and I am merely taking what is owed to me." His words, heavy with the weight of an ancient vendetta, hung in the air like a shroud of doom. "They took something valuable and irreplaceable from me. I promised I would come for them, and I never break my promises."

Will scoffed, his laughter a bitter gust in the deserted hotel. "Grudges and revenge ain't got no place in the West," he declared, his voice laced with the pragmatic wisdom of a man who'd weathered the storms of the frontier.

Hannibal, undeterred by Will's dismissive tone, replied with a firm resolve. "I have no care for your opinion, cowboy. My debts will be settled."

Will's laughter echoed in the hollow corridors, a defiant response to the stranger's unwavering determination. "You're a sassy one, ain't ya?" Hannibal huffed, an angry breath that hinted at a simmering intensity.

The air in the deserted hotel seemed to crackle with an inexplicable tension as Will found himself locked in an unexpected moment, his gaze tracing the features of the man beneath him.

The stranger lay on the dusty floor, his lips stained with blood, and his eyes—those furious, maroon eyes—fixed on Will with an intensity that sent an unfamiliar jolt through the cowboy's chest.

Will's scrutiny moved from the plush, red lips, to the sharp and elegant nose, and finally, to the eyes that held a fire that seemed to mirror the crimson dotting Hannibal's mouth.

Unbeknownst to Will, his heart, seemingly forgotten until this very moment, jolted as if reawakening to its purpose. He felt a disconcerting surge of something he couldn't quite put into words, and whatever it was, he didn't like it one bit.

In a hasty motion, as if to break the enchantment that had momentarily held him captive, Will jerked away from Hannibal. He rose to his feet, the cowboy's gaze now avoiding the man. A quick, mechanical movement saw Will pocketing his knife, the weight of it offering a reassuring anchor in the midst of this unsettling encounter.

"Guess you're one lucky son of a bitch I'm feeling charitable today," Will muttered, his tone gruff as he finally tore his eyes away from Hannibal's unsettling gaze.

The man beneath him grunted, pushing himself up to a sitting position. He nodded in acknowledgment, a wry smile playing on his blood-stained lips. "It seems you are not my Scipio after all."

Will, now standing and avoiding direct eye contact, furrowed his brow at the mention of the unfamiliar name. The jolt in his heart, a confusing sensation he couldn't shake, intensified. "Who?" he demanded, the word sharp as a crack of a whip in the stillness of the hotel.

Hannibal blinked. He sighed, the sound carrying the weight of a man accustomed to explaining the intricacies of history. "Scipio Africanus," he began, his voice a rich baritone that cut through the silence.

Will shot him a sidelong glance, a dry smirk playing on his lips. "Don't much care for history lessons," he retorted, a dismissive edge to his words. The cowboy, a man of the present with little regard for the past, had no interest in the tales of long-gone conquerors.

Hannibal gave him a dry look, the maroon fire in his eyes undiminished. "Ignorance is a dangerous ally, cowboy."

Will snorted, the sound filled with a mix of amusement and irritation. "In this godforsaken place, knowledge ain't the currency that'll keep you alive."

The exchange between the two men, a clash of perspectives and a dance of verbal sparring, lingered in the air like the residual smoke of a spent gunshot. Will, though he refused to admit it even to himself, couldn't entirely shake the unsettling feeling that had gripped him during that fleeting moment of shared gaze.

Hannibal, undeterred, continued with a historian's zeal. "Scipio earned the title 'Africanus' for defeating Hannibal in Africa. He outsmarted and outmaneuvered the great tactician."

Will's eyes flickered with a flicker of irritation. "Don't see the relevance."

The stranger paused, assessing Will's stoic demeanor. "I thought you might be my Scipio, my worthy adversary in this relentless frontier."

Will, unimpressed, finally met Hannibal's gaze with a hint of exasperation. "I'm just a man tryin' to survive. Don't need no ancient titles or fuckin’ vendettas complicatin' things."

Hannibal's lips curled into a wry smile, the disappointment replaced by a subtle amusement. "Survival, the most primal of instincts. It seems I've misjudged you, cowboy."

Will, indifferent to Hannibal's assessment, merely nodded. "Yeah, well, misjudgments can be costly."

Will's keen eyes caught the subtle wince that escaped Hannibal's stoic demeanor. The cowboy, despite his gruff exterior, couldn't ignore the signs of pain etched on the stranger's face.

"You hurt?" Will's voice, rough and practical, cut through the stillness of the hotel. Hannibal, acknowledging the inquiry, lifted the bottom of his shirt, revealing a shallow cut on his stomach.

Will sighed, a gruff acknowledgment of life's unforgiving nature. "Well, damn, life's a bitch."

A moment of stillness enveloped them as Will stared at the cut on Hannibal's stomach. His gaze moved up to the drying blood on Hannibal's mouth, and an unfamiliar buzz resonated within his stomach. Shivering at the unexpected reaction, Will chose to break the moment, walking out of the hotel with a purposeful stride.

The aftermath of the struggle lay in the form of corpses and blood, a tapestry that adorned the town's desolation. Will, his mind waging a silent battle, made his way towards his horse. His instincts, honed by years of surviving in the unforgiving wilderness, screamed at him to leave the man to die and safeguard himself. But a single thought of those intense brown eyes disrupted the familiar rhythm, and Will cursed under his breath.

An internal conflict played out in Will's mind, the rational voice urging him to stay away, but an inexplicable force compelling him to return. Will's hands moved with a life of their own as he grabbed the whiskey from his sack and ripped the bandana off his neck. With a determined stride, he re-entered the saloon, finding Hannibal and shoving the objects into his hands.

Hannibal looked at Will with a quizzical expression, a silent question in his gaze. Will, stoic and unreadable, grunted in response, crossing his arms as he waited for Hannibal to tend to his wounds.

In the quiet exchange, Will watched as Hannibal wetted the bandana with the whiskey, cleaning the blood off his stomach. The unfamiliar buzz returned as Will's gaze followed the movement, his attention drawn to the man standing before him.

Once Hannibal finished, he handed the whiskey back to Will and pocketed the bandana. A brief moment of gratitude passed between them, communicated through the silent exchange of objects.

Standing in the hushed ambiance, Will felt Hannibal's eyes on him. The unspoken tension thickened the air, leaving a palpable residue of curiosity between the two men. A question hung in the silence, and Hannibal voiced it with a calm inquiry.

"Why are you helping me?" Hannibal's voice, a velvety timbre, resonated in the stillness. Will, shifting on his feet, pulled his hat down lower, casting a shadow over his features.

Shrugging in response, Will evaded a direct answer. "Ain't got a reason. Just felt like it."

Hannibal's lips curved into a subtle smile, a glimmer of amusement dancing in his eyes. The cowboy, uncomfortable with the scrutiny, chose to remain silent. The stranger, however, persisted.

"What is your name?" Hannibal's question hung in the air, and Will's fists clenched instinctively. The cowboy had no intention of revealing his identity.

"Nobody gets to know my name. I'm a damn ghost," Will declared, his voice firm. The enigmatic smile on Hannibal's face persisted, and Will felt a shift in the air.

Hannibal, undeterred, pressed further. "A ghost with a kind heart, it seems. Why help a stranger?"

Will's eyes narrowed, his guarded demeanor tightening. "Don't read too much into it. Survival instinct, nothin' more."

The silence lingered, each man sizing up the other in the light of the deserted hotel. Hannibal's gaze, persistent and penetrating, held a layer of curiosity that went beyond the surface.

Hannibal's smile, a subtle curve of lips that hinted at amusement, made Will swallow involuntarily. The intensity in the stranger's eyes didn't escape him, and he chose to ignore the way Hannibal's gaze lingered on the movement of his Adam's apple.

Will, a man of few words but steely resolve, grunted in inquiry as he turned his gaze towards Hannibal. "How're you plannin' to travel?"

Hannibal, ever composed, gestured with a subtle nod towards the back of the building. "There are horses out back. I can use them."

Will, pragmatic and accustomed to a solitary existence, nodded in acknowledgment. "Alright then," he muttered, the gruffness of his voice betraying the lingering unease beneath the surface. "I'll be off."

As Will walked out into the dwindling light, the weight of Hannibal's gaze, a gaze that seemed to pierce through the layers of anonymity Will had carefully cultivated, settled upon him. An unsettling awareness gnawed at the cowboy; this man, Hannibal, now knew his face, a revelation that echoed louder than the footsteps that echoed in the deserted town.

On horseback, the vantage point of many a solitary escape, Will observed Hannibal's resourcefulness. The stranger, undeterred by the violence that had unfolded, grabbed a hat from one of the lifeless forms strewn across the dust-laden ground. The exchange of glances between them, silent but filled with unspoken acknowledgment, lingered in the gathering dusk.

Cursing under his breath, Will grappled with an uncharacteristic hesitation. The practicality that had guided him through the harsh terrain of the Wild West collided with the unexpected emergence of a companion. The internal conflict, a tempest within the cowboy's stoic exterior, raged as he questioned why he wasn't already miles away, leaving the stranger to face the consequences of their shared ordeal.

Hannibal should be dead, a consequence done by Will’s own hand. Yet, there he was—alive, seemingly unfazed, moving towards the back of the building with the deliberate grace of a predator securing his prey. The internal conflict within Will intensified, a tempest of conflicting instincts and emotions that left him suspended in indecision.

The darkening canvas of the sky above witnessed the tentative partnership forged in the crucible of chaos. Will, the lone cowboy with a penchant for anonymity, and Hannibal, the stranger whose gaze hinted at depths untold, stood at the precipice of a journey neither had chosen.

Will looked down at his worn boots, tracing the patterns etched by countless miles of travel, as the rhythmic beat of approaching hooves drew nearer. The air seemed to vibrate with the promise of change, and Will lifted his gaze, squinting against the harsh sunlight, to see Hannibal guiding his horse beside Will's.

The realization hit Will like a punch to the gut—this, whatever it was, meant he was inviting trouble. The kind of trouble that could claim a man's life out in the unforgiving wilderness. He scolded himself inwardly for the reckless decision that had led to this moment. It was an idiot's move, a gambit that went against the code of survival he'd lived by for years. Yet, he couldn't deny the strange allure of the unexpected companionship.

Will felt a surge of discomfort, a sensation he hadn't welcomed in years. This was the price of feeling something genuine, a vulnerability he had long abandoned. He hated it, despised the very notion of being affected by another soul, but there he stood—boots firmly planted, emotions tumultuous.

He muttered his name, almost lost in the dry wind that whispered through the emptiness around them. The sound barely reached Hannibal's ears, and he asked Will to repeat himself. Will scowled, a deep furrow etching across his brow. He could almost sense the amused smile playing on Hannibal's lips, a response that added fuel to the internal turmoil.

Will repeated his name, this time louder. The acknowledgment hung in the air, a fragile thread connecting two disparate lives on the brink of an uncertain journey.

"It is nice to meet you," Hannibal offered, his tone carrying a measured sincerity.

Will spared a glance at the man, his gaze meeting the tilted head of Hannibal. The man seemed genuinely interested, an observation that irked Will. He couldn't shake the feeling that this encounter was more than chance, that the stranger beside him held a depth that defied their circumstances.

Hannibal's question lingered, an inquiry veiled in politeness. "Does this mean I may come with you?"

"Don't play dumb," Will retorted, his voice sharp and cutting through the quiet. He looked straight ahead, unwilling to meet Hannibal's eyes, a defensive posture that shielded him from the vulnerability he felt. "I don't find you all too interestin'."

Hannibal, undeterred by Will's dismissive tone, offered a cryptic response that sent a chill down the cowboy's spine. "You will."

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will felt beads of sweat trickling down his face, more profusely than usual, as he wiped his sticky, long curls off his forehead with the back of his hand. A distant thought crossed his mind, he needed to chop off his hair with his knife soon, but the persistent drone of Hannibal's ceaseless talking interrupted his contemplation.

Hannibal, astride his horse, indulged in a stream of stories and metaphors that sounded too erudite for the likes of Will. The words flowed effortlessly from the stranger's lips, weaving a tapestry of tales. Will found himself more annoyed by the incessant chatter than he cared to admit.

"So, you see, Will, some think life is like the Moirai, the Fates," Hannibal expounded, his voice carrying a tone of refined eloquence that grated against the rugged simplicity of the frontier.

Will scowled. The mention of Moirai, a concept too abstract for his taste, only fueled his irritation. "Do you ever shut up?" he grumbled, the words escaping through gritted teeth.

Hannibal, seemingly unfazed by Will's remark, looked amused. "Rudeness is unbecoming, Will," he remarked, a hint of a smirk playing on his lips.

"I don't care much for becomin' anything in your eyes," Will retorted, his tone curt and unyielding.

The horses' hooves clopped rhythmically against the dry earth, a steady beat to the backdrop of Hannibal's continued discourse. Will, caught between the monotony of the journey and the relentless flow of words, found himself grappling with an internal struggle.

He refused to acknowledge the subtle truth—Hannibal's voice, despite the irritation it stirred, caused an unwelcome flutter in his heart.

As Hannibal delved into another intricate metaphor, Will's scowl deepened. "Can't you talk like a normal man?" he muttered, a gruffness in his voice that betrayed the underlying discomfort.

Hannibal, undeterred, continued his verbal dance, the cadence of his words a symphony of intellect and verbosity. "The Fates, Will, they spin the threads of destiny, determining the course of our lives with an indifferent hand. But, unlike the Moirai, we may possess the agency to alter the patterns of our fate. Do you not find that fascinating?"

Will's jaw tightened, a subtle sign of his frustration. "I find it fascinatin' how you can talk so much without sayin' a damn thing," he quipped, the retort laced with a touch of sarcasm.

Will, a man of few words but steadfast in his convictions, cleared his throat before addressing Hannibal again. "Even though we're travelin' together, you're still on your own," he declared, his voice cutting through the monotony of horse hooves against the ground. "I ain't takin' on another mouth to feed. You get hurt, you die. You get hungry, you find your own damn food. You got that?"

Hannibal, astride his horse, huffed an amused laugh, the sound carrying an air of sophistication. "I assure you, Will, I am not a newborn in need of constant care," he replied, a subtle smile playing on his lips.

Will shot Hannibal a glare, the intensity of his gaze momentarily meeting the piercing sunlight that bathed the landscape. The stranger's face seemed to glow, radiant in the sun, a spectacle that irked Will more than he wanted. "You may be used to a different way of life, but out here, it's every man for himself," Will asserted.

Hannibal, seemingly unperturbed by Will's declaration, reminded him of a previous encounter. "Let's not forget you found me surrounded by the corpses of men with little more than a scratch," he pointed out, the words carrying a hint of pride. "I am quite capable of fending for myself."

Will's jaw tightened, a subtle acknowledgment of the truth in Hannibal's words. Swallowing his pride, he nodded. "Just makin' sure we're clear on the terms," he muttered, a touch of

gruffness in his voice.

As Will rode alongside Hannibal, the stranger delved into yet another tale, this time invoking the name of Ares, the Greek god of war.

"Ares is a fascinating figure," Hannibal began, his voice carrying a certain enthusiasm that grated against the cowboy's ears. "A god of war, embodying the chaos and brutality of conflict. The way he navigated the battlefield, the carnage left in his wake—"

Will interrupted with a groan. "Not another one of your damn stories," he muttered, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

Hannibal, undeterred, continued with his discourse, drawing parallels between the god of war and their own journey. "Ares was revered for his strength, his prowess in battle. Much like the challenges we face in this desolate realm."

Will couldn't help but snicker, the absurdity of Hannibal comparing himself to a god not lost on him. "You likening yourself to a god now?" he quipped, a smirk playing on his lips.

Hannibal's gaze turned steely, the glint of irritation evident in his eyes. "I am merely drawing comparisons to illustrate certain qualities," he replied, his tone retaining a dignified composure.

Will chuckled, a sound that bordered on disbelief. "Well, mister, last time I checked, gods don't ride horses through the Wild West with a bunch of undead wanderin' about."

A glare from Hannibal met Will's mocking gaze. "You, Will, are a wild, noncivilized cowboy," he retorted, a note of condescension lacing his words.

Will's response was swift. "Politeness ain't gonna help you chop off a walker's head," he declared, his voice gruff and matter-of-fact.

Hannibal bristled at the cowboy's bluntness, a flicker of irritation crossing his features. "There's a certain grace even in the act of dispatching the undead," he remarked, his tone attempting to retain a sense of superiority.

Will rolled his eyes. "I ain't lookin' for grace, I'm lookin' for survival. Now, quiet," he ordered, the gruffness in his voice leaving little room for argument.

The horses trotted along the dusty trail, their hooves creating a rhythmic beat against the arid earth. Will, adjusting the weight of his bag on his shoulder, cast a sidelong glance at Hannibal. The stranger rode beside him, the relentless heat of the West unfazed by the passage of time.

As they approached a pathway, both men's eyes were drawn to a weathered wooden sign that stood at the crossroads, smeared with what looked like dried blood. Will squinted, his gaze focusing on the words etched onto the aged wood.

"And this shall be the plague with which the Lord will strike all the peoples that wage war against Jerusalem: their flesh will rot while they are still standing on their feet, their eyes will rot in their sockets, and their tongues will rot in their mouths."

The words, ominous and foreboding, hung in the air, a stark reminder of the biblical implications of the world they now traversed. Will's jaw tightened, the weight of the scripture settling uncomfortably in the pit of his stomach. He exchanged a glance with Hannibal, the acknowledgment of the eerie atmosphere lingering between them.

"Well, ain't that a cheery message for weary travelers," Will muttered, a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

Will, still adjusting the strap of his bag, allowed his thoughts to drift as they often did in the relative quiet of the journey. The sign lingered in the back of his mind, and a scoff escaped

his lips.

"People are idiots for believin' in God in the first place," Will asserted, his voice carrying a gruffness that mirrored the harshness of their surroundings. "No all-lovin' God would leave us in a hell like this."

Hannibal tilted his head slightly. "On the contrary, Will, God is not all-loving. He is merciless, delighting in the suffering of his creations," he stated, his words carrying an air of conviction.

Will raised an eyebrow, his interest piqued by Hannibal's unconventional perspective. "You sayin' God enjoys watchin' us struggle?" he questioned, a mix of skepticism and curiosity in his tone.

Hannibal's maroon eyes gleamed with an intensity that caught Will off guard. "Yes, precisely," he affirmed, his voice carrying a weight of certainty. "God is not a benevolent force. He revels in the intricacies of our torment, finding satisfaction in our suffering."

Will's gaze fixed on Hannibal, a mixture of incredulity and intrigue etched across his features. "You don’t like God, don't you?" he probed, the question hanging in the air like a lingering echo.

A flicker of something akin to anger crossed Hannibal's countenance. "Dislike is an understatement," he admitted, his voice holding a note of disdain. "The divine orchestrator of our plight, indifferent to our struggles and indifferent to our pleas for mercy."

Will observed Hannibal with a newfound interest, the revelation adding another layer to the stranger by his side. "If there is a God," Will mused, his words measured, "you might be onto somethin'. One mean son of a bitch."

The maroon hue of Hannibal's eyes glinted with a fervent intensity, and the sight made Will's breath hitch. Cursing himself, he looked away, the heat creeping onto his cheeks unnoticed by the sun.

"Perhaps you are more astute than most," Hannibal conceded, the edge of a smirk playing on his lips. "The divinity we once revered has abandoned us, leaving nothing but the remnants of a world consumed by decay."

Will's lips quirked into a wry smile. "Well, stranger, whether there's a God or not, I reckon we're stuck here dealin' with the aftermath of his handiwork," he remarked, steering the conversation back to the tangible challenges of their journey.

Will practiced his knife throwing. His sharp blue eyes squinted against the glaring rays, his hat pulled low to shield his face. Beside him, the figure of Hannibal observed with an air of detached interest, his maroon eyes keenly focused on Will's every move.

Will, feeling the weight of Hannibal's scrutiny, cursed under his breath, a low grumble that betrayed his nervousness. His hand gripped the knife hilt tightly. Each throw missed its mark, the blade slicing through the air only to embed itself outside Will’s drawn target.

Frustration etched lines on Will's face as he muttered to himself about being better at this than it appeared. He longed to rid himself of Hannibal's watchful eye, imagining the satisfaction of scratching the man's gaze out like a feral cat.

Hannibal, seemingly amused by Will's struggles, approached with an air of calm authority. He reached for Will's knife, a subtle gesture that drew a scowl from the cowboy. Hannibal's voice, smooth and unwavering, cut through the silence of the barren landscape as he explained the nuances of knife throwing.

"Your technique is slightly off, Will," Hannibal remarked, his words carrying a precision that mirrored the fluidity of his movements. With a practiced motion, he demonstrated the correct form, the knife leaving his hand in a graceful arc. It hit the little circle Will had drawn into the ground with pinpoint accuracy.

Will bristled at the demonstration, his pride wounded by the implication that he needed instruction. He walked briskly to retrieve his knife, his jaw clenched with defiance. "I know more 'bout knives than you ever will," he grumbled, his accent thickening with irritation. "Don't you touch my goddamn knife."

Hannibal, undeterred by Will's defensive stance, met his gaze with a sly smile. The cowboy's resolve wavered for a moment, distracted by the curve of Hannibal's lips. In that brief lapse of concentration, Will missed his target once again.

Will, squinting against the relentless sunlight, spotted something on the side of the road. Toppled wagons lay abandoned, their wooden frames battered by time and decay. His keen eyes narrowed, and he raised a hand to signal Hannibal to halt his horse.

The stranger, ever stoic, tilted his head and seemed to sniff the stagnant air. "No one is there," Hannibal declared with certainty.

Will scowled, a frown etched on his features. "Stay put," he ordered, pulling his knife from its sheath. He eyed Hannibal with a mixture of irritation and concern. "You're a stubborn ass," he muttered, knowing the older man wouldn't heed his words.

As Hannibal dismounted, Will approached the toppled wagons cautiously. The dust hung in the air like a spectral shroud, adding an eerie ambiance to the scene. Will's boots crunched on the uneven ground as he cursed softly, scanning the surroundings for any signs of movement.

He froze as he saw Hannibal striding past him, the older man's confident steps infuriatingly defiant. "What the hell do you think you're doin'?" Will hissed, his gaze narrowing at Hannibal's back.

Hannibal turned, his maroon eyes meeting Will's with a calm assurance. "You worry too much, Will," he remarked, his tone carrying an almost mocking edge. He approached the closest wagon and lifted the sheet that covered its contents, his gaze penetrating the shadows within.

Will's jaw clenched, frustration bubbling within him. "I ain't worryin' for nothin'," he shot back, irritation lacing his voice. He approached Hannibal, keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings.

Will glared at the toppled carriage before peering inside. The emptiness met his gaze, and he grunted in mild frustration. He shifted his attention to the barren interior, pointedly ignoring Hannibal's delighted smile.

Rifling through the wagon, the two men scoured for anything salvageable in the wreckage. Will's calloused fingers grazed over items left behind. His fingers closed around a piece of fabric, and he pulled out a worn but serviceable bandana.

"Finally found somethin' worth takin'," Will muttered to himself, tying the bandana around his neck. The fabric offered a brief reprieve from the dry wind, providing a small comfort in their scavenging.

Hannibal, however, seized a belt with an enthusiasm that left Will scowling. “The craftsmanship is exquisite," Hannibal exclaimed, running his fingers over the fine details etched into the leather.

Will grimaced at Hannibal's animated appreciation for the mundane. "You act like you've never seen a damn belt before," he grumbled.

Hannibal looked up, his maroon eyes gleaming with a peculiar fervor. "But this is no ordinary belt, Will. It tells a story, a narrative etched into the very fabric of its being."

Will rolled his eyes, unimpressed by Hannibal's poetic musings. "It's just a damn belt. Ain't no story gonna change that fact."

“In a world where chaos reigns, appreciating the remnants of beauty becomes a rare pleasure," Hannibal explained, his words carrying a poetic resonance.

Will snorted, his skepticism evident. "You talk like it's some kind of philosopher's stone. It's just leather and metal."

Hannibal smirked. "Perhaps you are the one who's missing the subtleties of life, Will. A man should appreciate the beauty in the simplest of things."

Will shot Hannibal a deadpan look. "I appreciate things that keep me alive, not fancy belts."

Hannibal's smile persisted, undeterred by Will's pragmatism. "One would think you are as frigid as a walker, Will. Where is the warmth in your heart?"

Will scowled at Hannibal's comment, the accusation striking a nerve. "Don't go readin' me like some damn book, Hannibal."

Will's frustration mounted with each passing moment, the scorching heat exacerbating his already frayed nerves. The West had stripped him of many things, but control over his emotions seemed to be the latest casualty, leaving him on edge.

As Will rummaged through the remnants of the toppled wagon, he felt Hannibal's eyes on him – an unwanted scrutiny that set his neck hairs on end. The sensation intensified his irritation, the unfamiliar vulnerability stirring a panic within him.

Unable to bear it any longer, Will turned abruptly, pushing Hannibal and crowding him against the wagon. "Why the hell can't you keep your damn eyes to yourself?" he snapped, his voice a low growl.

Hannibal, seemingly unfazed by the sudden aggression, looked down at Will with a tilted head. The air between them crackled with tension as they stood still, breathing each other's air. Will's chest tightened, the intensity of Hannibal's gaze wreaking havoc on his already turbulent emotions.

In slow motion, Will watched as Hannibal's lips curled into a snake-like smile, sharp teeth on full display. Heat surged through Will's entire face, his heart jolting in response to the unexpected intimacy. With a curse, Will released Hannibal, turning his back to the older man and refocusing on the wagon.

Hannibal, composed and seemingly amused, smoothed down his clothes with deliberate precision. "Do not flatter yourself, cowboy," he remarked, his voice carrying a hint of mockery. "I was merely looking at your atrocious hat."

Will shot Hannibal a venomous glare. "You're one to talk about fashion, city slicker," he retorted, his voice dripping with disdain. "And I ain't flattered, just annoyed."

He wished he could just end the man, rid himself of the unsettling mix of irritation and something he couldn't quite put a name to.

The dying embers of the day cast a warm glow on the rugged terrain as Will begrudgingly set up their camp for the night. The silence, a precious commodity in this desolate world, had hung between them like a fragile membrane for the past hour, a respite Will had grown accustomed to in the solitude of his survival.

However, his momentary reprieve was shattered as he heard the familiar cadence of Hannibal's voice. Will grunted, realizing that the silence he cherished had been a fleeting luxury.

"I wonder, Will," Hannibal mused, his tone contemplative, "how were you before this outbreak, before the world turned upside down?"

Will scoffed, his hands working mechanically on the meager camp setup. "There's no 'before,'" he muttered, his voice carrying the weight of a history he was unwilling to delve into. "The past is just that – the past."

Hannibal, undeterred, tilted his head, his maroon eyes fixed on Will. "But surely, there must have been a time when life held different meaning for you," he pressed, his curiosity evident.

Will frowned, a shadow crossing his features. "I was the same," he declared, his words carrying a stoic finality. He refused to allow the ghosts of his past to resurface, the memories of a time when the world had not been consumed by the chaos of the undead.

Hannibal, however, seemed to find amusement in the challenge. A smirk played on his lips as he probed further. "And how were you before you found me?" he inquired, a gleam of mischief in his eyes.

Will's gaze hardened, and he shot back with a dismissive tone. "I was the same," he repeated, his response almost rehearsed.

Hannibal's smirk persisted, as if he held a secret that danced just out of Will's grasp. Frustration bubbled within Will, and he sighed, turning away from the penetrating gaze of the older man.

Changing the focus away from himself, Will redirected the conversation. "And where were you before you stumbled upon me?" he asked, a hint of curiosity in his tone.

Hannibal's smile widened, a subtle elegance in his response. "I thought there was no 'before,' Will," he remarked, his words echoing Will's own earlier sentiment.

Will scowled, realizing that Hannibal had skillfully turned his own words against him. "Quit dodgin' the question," he demanded, unwilling to let the conversation drift into the realms of ambiguity.

Hannibal chuckled, the sound carrying a note of amusement. "Perhaps, Will, we are not so different after all," he mused, his eyes gleaming.

Will's gaze lingered on Hannibal. The memories of their first encounter, the feral creature with a bloodied mouth and hatred gleaming in his eyes, played in the recesses of Will's mind. The image of the men, their throats brutally ripped out, swam in his thoughts.

"Why'd you rip their throats out?" Will asked, his voice gruff with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

Hannibal's response was a smile, a calculated expression that hinted at depths unknown. "Would you believe, Will, that I was merely hungry?" he suggested, his tone a blend of amusement and indifference.

Will shot him a glare, unimpressed by the response, and continued with the task at hand.

Hannibal, unaffected by Will's skepticism, elaborated on his choice of brutality. "I had no other weapons at my disposal," he explained, his eyes gleaming with a predatory light. "Time was of the essence, and I used what I had." He gestured casually to his sharp canines, a predatory smile playing on his lips.

Will hummed in acknowledgment, a subtle understanding settling between them. The reality of survival in this unforgiving world often meant making choices that would have been inconceivable in a different time.

A shiver ran down Will's spine as he broached a more unsettling question. "Did you spit the meat out?" he asked, the implications of Hannibal's actions stirring a complex mix of curiosity and something else – something opposite to what should be disgust.

Hannibal huffed in response. "I am not one to waste," he stated matter-of-factly, his words hanging in the air.

The buzz in Will's stomach, a sensation he couldn't quite define, intensified. He shifted on his feet, grappling with the conflicting emotions that stirred within him.

"I've heard tales of groups out here eatin' folks," Will remarked, his voice carrying the weight of caution. "Ain't much else to eat, so they hunt down their own kind. String 'em up like cattle."

Hannibal, unfazed by the grim topic, emitted a low hum. "I am not part of those groups," he replied with an air of detached assurance.

Will, in his pragmatic acceptance of the harshness that colored their world, simply nodded. The unspoken hope lingered between them that such groups would remain an elusive specter, never crossing their path.

Hannibal continued the conversation with an insightful perspective. "Those people eat for survival, nothing more," he explained. "Humans, when faced with desperation, resort to depravity. They do not appreciate the beauty of consumption."

Will frowned, his brows furrowing in confusion. "You call eatin' people beautiful?" he questioned, a certain incredulity coloring his tone.

Hannibal met Will's gaze with a steady look. “The appreciation of the art of consumption, the savoring of each moment, the acknowledgment of the sacrifice made – that is what I find beautiful."

Will's expression remained skeptical, a mix of curiosity and wariness etched on his features. "You're a strange one, Hannibal," he remarked, the disconcerting truth settling over their conversation like a heavy shroud.

Hannibal acknowledged the observation with a nod. "Perhaps," he conceded, his lips curling into a faint smile.

Will grunted as he settled down beside Hannibal, who was sprawled out like a contented cat.

Will, grappling with an inexplicable discomfort, took off his hat and placed it over his face, shielding his eyes from the sight of Hannibal. He couldn't quite fathom why the mere gaze of the man caused his heart to flutter in a way he couldn't control. The night air carried the sound of Hannibal huffing an amused laugh, prompting him to speak.

"Am I that terrible to look at, Will?" Hannibal inquired, a teasing lilt in his voice.

Will grumbled from beneath the shelter of his hat, "No," the admission escaping him begrudgingly.

Hannibal turned to face him. Will's breath hitched under the concealing brim of his hat as he felt Hannibal's gaze settle on him. The probing scrutiny continued, Hannibal delving into the intricacies of Will's psyche with a relentless curiosity.

"Trust does not come easily for you, does it?" Hannibal mused, his voice a low murmur that seemed to pierce the veil of the night.

Will shifted uncomfortably, his discomfort palpable even in the darkness. "Not everyone's good at trustin’," he muttered, evading a direct response.

"Is that why you avoid eye contact?" Hannibal questioned, the inquiry hanging in the air.

"Eyes are distracting," Will replied, his tone curt and matter-of-fact.

Hannibal pressed further. "You have no forts in the bone arena of your skull for things you love," he observed, his words carrying a weight of insight.

Will bristled at the revelation, his guard momentarily slipping. "I don't love anythin’, never have, never will," he retorted, the denial a shield against vulnerabilities he refused to acknowledge.

Hannibal, rather than challenging the statement, hummed in contemplation. "Perhaps that is a gift," he mused.

Will grunted and turned to face Hannibal, his hat still veiling his features. The low embers of the fire flickered, casting a dance of shadows over their conversation.

Hannibal, ever the provocateur, quipped, "You look quite handsome like that, Will."

A tinge of pink colored Will's cheeks, hidden as they were beneath the brim of his hat. Ignoring the compliment—or jest, as Will saw it—he gruffly asked, "Are you callin' me ugly?"

Hannibal's response was swift and laden with amusement, "No."

Will grunted again, a noncommittal acknowledgment, and shifted his face deeper into the refuge of his hat. He sneered, recalling the encounter from the other day,

"Was feelin' charitable not to kill you the other day. Might not be feelin' the same tomorrow."

Hannibal, undeterred by Will's threats, hummed in amusement and asked, "And how would you do it?"

Will, ever the pragmatic cowboy, shrugged and replied, "With my knife."

Hannibal pressed further. "Not very intimate, is it?" he remarked, the corners of his mouth lifting in a subtle smile.

Will scoffed at the notion, asserting, "Ain't nothin' intimate 'bout killin'."

Hannibal, with a quiet intensity, offered a counterpoint. "I would like to change your mind about that, Will."

Will huffed, his patience waning as he demanded, "Do whatever the hell you want. Just shut up so I can get some damn sleep."

Hannibal, unflinchingly serene, smiled in response. "As you wish, cowboy," he conceded, the words hanging in the night air.

Chapter End Notes

poor hanni, will won’t let him talk!! i’m aiming for 8-10 chapters for this but that depends on how long it takes will to accept the fact he has a little crush hehe thank you for kudos and comments!! :3

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The air was filled with the promise of a new day, yet for Will Graham, the cowboy standing over Hannibal, the dawn brought with it a heavy decision.

His fingers fidgeted restlessly, an action of uncertainty as he tightened his grip on the worn handle of his knife. The rhythmic chewing on his cheek betrayed the internal turmoil, a silent storm raging beneath the stoic surface of his countenance. Hannibal, seemingly unperturbed, lay before him bathed in the soft morning light.

A thought lingered in Will's mind like the specter of a ghost. He could end it now—silence the words shared beneath the starlit skies and erase the encounter from the ledger of his existence. A swift, decisive slit of Hannibal's throat, and he could ride off into the dawn, leaving behind the remnants of a life that had briefly intersected with another.

Will's gaze bore into Hannibal's still form, the knife in his hand becoming both a weapon and a symbol of the power he held. He envisioned the visceral scene, Hannibal's lifeblood pooling on the arid ground, the metallic scent cutting through the crisp morning air. The image, vivid and grotesque, played out in his mind's eye.

A wave of nausea, like a sudden gust of wind, swept over Will, compelling him to close his eyes and banish the thought. The very notion of Hannibal dead, a violent spectacle that would draw the attention of the ever-present walkers, unsettled him to his core. The stench of death, the guttural groans of the undead tearing at Hannibal's lifeless form, churned his stomach.

Will muttered under his breath, the words carried away by the wind as if seeking refuge in the vast emptiness that surrounded them. He cursed himself for the weakness that clung to him, the hesitation that anchored him in place.

And yet, a more perplexing question lingered—why hadn't Hannibal killed *him* ? The unpredictability of Hannibal's motivations remained an elusive puzzle, leaving Will grappling with his own survival.

A slow blink disrupted the stillness, and Hannibal's eyes flickered open—one, then the other, revealing an unsettlingly alert gaze. A smirk played on Hannibal's lips, a calculated expression that heightened the tension in the air. Will felt a heat rising to his face, an involuntary response he vehemently denied within the recesses of his stoic demeanor.

"Will," Hannibal's voice, smooth and unwavering, cut through the silence like a well-sharpened blade. "You seem to be taking an awful lot of time to carry out your intentions. One could wonder if you are having second thoughts."

Will scowled, his jaw clenching with a mix of irritation and embarrassment. "Ain't havin' second thoughts," he muttered, refusing to acknowledge the undeniable fluster that clung to his demeanor like dust to his worn boots.

Hannibal's smirk widened, a glimmer of amusement in his maroon eyes. "Such ferocity in you, Will," he observed, the words hanging in the air like a taunt.

Frustration gnawed at Will, and he spat on the ground beside Hannibal. "Don't go actin' like I'm putty in your damn hands," he retorted.

Hannibal chuckled. "I would never assume such a thing," he replied, the smirk persisting on his lips. "But I must admit, your hesitance is rather... entertaining."

Will cursed under his breath, the heat in his face intensifying. He refused to let Hannibal's words unravel the tightly wound threads of his composure. With a scowl, he urged Hannibal to get up. "We'd better get goin'. Unless you fancy lyin' around lookin' pretty all day."

Hannibal's eyes glinted with amusement as he slowly rose from the ground. "Did I just hear you compliment me, Will?" he quipped, a mischievous glimmer in his gaze.

Will shot Hannibal a withering glare. "You arrogant son of a bitch," he said, turning away and walking toward his horse. The rhythmic clatter of his boots on the dry earth marked the retreat of the cowboy.

Hannibal, undeterred by Will's curt dismissal, followed with a leisurely pace. "I will take it as a compliment, then," he remarked, the smile never leaving his face. "Quit your jawin' and mount up," Will grumbled.

Will leaned against the saddle of his horse, his hands methodically cleaning his gun with the worn bandana he had salvaged from the toppled wagon. The rhythmic swish of fabric against metal served as a backdrop to the otherwise blessedly quiet day .

Hannibal stood nearby, an observer as he often was. Will grimaced, the harsh sunlight causing him to tilt his hat further down, casting a shadow that shielded his eyes from the gaze of the older man. The subtle sounds of the desert—the distant cawing of a crow, the rustle of tumbleweeds carried by the wind—seemed to amplify the weight of Hannibal's presence. A measured inhale reached Will's ears, and he raised an eyebrow in silent acknowledgment.

“How did you come by this gun?" Hannibal's inquiry cut through the stillness, his words carrying a curiosity that betrayed a keen interest in the fragments of Will's past.

Will sighed, closing his eyes briefly, grappling with memories he wished to keep buried. He didn't want to share this part of himself with Hannibal, a man whose motives and desires remained veiled.

But, much to Will's chagrin, his mouth seemed to have a mind of its own. "It was my Pa's," he admitted, the words escaping him with a heavy sigh. The admission hung in the air like a spectral presence, a connection to a past he sought to distance himself from.

Hannibal's response, a simple hum, seemed to carry an unspoken acknowledgment of the weight carried in the mention of a father. Will glanced at Hannibal from beneath the brim of his hat, surprised by the lack of further inquiry. "Don't you have anythin' to say?" Will questioned, a hint of frustration lacing his words.

Hannibal moved closer, standing next to Will. The cowboy shifted on his feet, feeling the weight of Hannibal's gaze even without looking directly into the maroon eyes that seemed to hold a depth of understanding. Will resumed the task of wiping his gun, the repetitive motion serving as a distraction from the tumultuous thoughts within.

"I can imagine you then," Hannibal mused, his words a calm stream that flowed into the quiet desert air. "All long limbs and youthful glow. Happy, cheeks tinted pink." The unexpected description drew a scowl from Will, the mental image painted by Hannibal's words a stark contrast to the reality of his memories.

Will tried to deflect, unwilling to dwell on a past that seemed like a distant dream. "You're imaginin' wrong," he muttered, his tone gruff as he continued to avoid Hannibal's penetrating gaze.

But Hannibal persisted, the corners of his lips curling into a subtle smile. "Endlessly energetic, I would assume," he continued, his words carrying a wistful note as if contemplating the vitality that once defined the younger Will.

The cowboy scowled, the memories of a time when innocence hadn't been stripped away by the unforgiving West stirring within him. He muttered a dismissive response, unwilling to engage in the introspection Hannibal seemed to coax from the depths of his past

Will scoffed, his lips curving into a wry smile. "You must've been an entitled little prick as a kid," he remarked, switching the line of inquiry onto Hannibal. "Probably always lookin' down on poor folks like me."

To Will's surprise, Hannibal laughed. Will dared to look up for a moment, catching the gleam in Hannibal's eyes before quickly averting his gaze. The older man's response held a touch of amusement, "Quite the opposite, Will. I was feral, filled with primal energy to indulge. To dance, to paint, to sing, to play."

A reluctant smile tugged at Will's lips as he absorbed the unexpected revelation. The silence settled between them as each man contemplated the facets of their past, unspoken and unseen. “We probably wouldn’t have been great friends,” Will admitted.

Hannibal seemed to find amusement in the hypothetical scenario. "Are we friends now?" he inquired, his tone teasing, a spark of mischief gleaming in his maroon eyes.

Will laughed, a rough, genuine sound that echoed against the vast expanse of the desert. "The light from friendship won't reach us for a million years," he quipped.

Hannibal fake pouted, his lips curling into a mock expression of sadness. “A tragedy," he lamented, his voice dripping with playful melodrama.

Will rolled his eyes, the corners of his mouth twitching with the hint of a smile. "Ain't no tragedy," he countered.

This saloon was a forgotten relic, a hollow shell of its former raucous glory. Layers of dust clung to the air, a tangible testament to the passage of time and decay. Will and Hannibal, their weathered boots scuffing the worn floorboards, moved with a cautious determination, their eyes scanning the dimly lit interior for any signs of movement.

The air hung heavy with the acrid scent of rot. Will, ever alert, felt the tension in his muscles as he stepped over debris, his senses attuned to the slightest disturbance in the oppressive stillness. Beside him, Hannibal moved with an almost ghostly grace, his maroon eyes gleaming with a predatory focus.

As they rifled through the remnants of the saloon, Will couldn't shake the unsettling feeling that lingered in the air. He kept his hand on the hilt of his knife, a familiar comfort in the face of uncertainty.

The creak of a floorboard echoed through the desolation, and both men tensed. Will's heart skipped a beat, a primal instinct warning him of impending danger. He turned sharply toward Hannibal, his sharp blue eyes locking onto the maroon gaze of the stranger.

Without hesitation, Will shoved Hannibal to the side just as a walker lunged through the saloon doors. The creature crashed into Will with a force that sent him sprawling to the ground. The impact rattled his bones, and he cursed as his knife slipped from his grasp, skittering across the dusty floor.

The walker, a twisted husk of humanity, loomed over Will, its wet, bloody mouth snapping hungrily. Will, grappling with the realization that he was disarmed and vulnerable, cursed himself for the lapse in his guard. The tang of desperation and decay wafted from the creature.

With an adrenaline-fueled surge, Will wrestled with the walker, his hands fending off the snapping jaws and grappling with the fetid creature. The wet, guttural moans of the undead filled the air, an eerie sound that underscored the precarious dance between life and death.

As he wrestled with the walker, Will's eyes darted to the periphery, a glimpse of Hannibal poised with predatory intent. The stranger moved with a lethal grace. In a swift motion, Hannibal plunged his knife into the back of the walker's skull, the blade sinking deep into the decaying flesh.

The creature convulsed and went limp, its lifeless weight crashing onto Will. He took a deep, shuddering breath, feeling the reprieve of survival wash over him. Hannibal, ever composed, withdrew the knife from the walker's skull with a casual precision. A low hum escaped him, a sound that seemed to resonate with an unsettling satisfaction.

Will, struggling to push the lifeless weight off him, cursed under his breath. His instincts, a mix of frustration and a lingering disbelief, fueled his movements. He couldn't shake the unsettling realization that he had put himself in harm's way to protect Hannibal.

Will grunted, pushing himself up from the dusty floor. The taste of grit lingered in his mouth as he blinked against the muted glow. His hat, now slightly askew, shaded his eyes from the full brunt of the light.

Hannibal, extended a hand towards Will with an air of casual concern. "You are hurt," the stranger stated matter-of-factly, a soft but assertive quality to his voice.

Will's jaw tightened at the unsolicited assistance. "I'm fine," he growled, swatting away Hannibal's outstretched hand. The persistent throbbing in his hand and the lingering taste of adrenaline fueled his defiance.

Hannibal, undeterred by Will's brusqueness, seized Will's hand more forcefully than intended. The cowboy winced, feeling the rough texture of Hannibal's fingers against his skin. "Stubborn, aren't you?" Hannibal remarked, his tone laced with an undercurrent of amusement.

Will, his patience fraying, attempted to reclaim his hand, but Hannibal tightened his grip. With a swift and unexpected motion, the stranger guided Will against the wall, pinning his wrists with a determined strength. The sudden shift in dynamics caught Will off guard, his wide, furious eyes locking onto Hannibal's.

"What the hell do you think you're doin'?" Will spat, the proximity between them igniting a spark of heat in his chest.

Hannibal, his maroon eyes glinting with a mixture of amusement and something more inscrutable, leaned in, crowding into Will's personal space. "If you do not stop being a stubborn boy, you will risk infection," he murmured, his words brushing against the cowboy's ear like a subtle whisper of promise.

Will, fighting against the unsettling buzz that stirred within him, snarled, "I ain't no fuckin' boy."Hannibal's lips curled into a knowing smile, his fingers tightening around Will's wrists.

The saloon's silence enveloped them, the muffled sounds of the outside world barely audible through the timeworn walls. Hannibal, seemingly unperturbed by Will's ire, continued to hold him against the wall. "Let me look," he urged, his words carrying a soft insistence.

The cowboy felt his cheeks heat, the sensation foreign and unwelcome. "I can handle myself," Will protested.

Hannibal, with a slight smile, seemed to sense the internal struggle within Will. He released one of Will's wrists and gently raised the injured hand. "Just let me see," Hannibal

encouraged.

With a low growl, Will reluctantly let Hannibal look, avoiding his gaze. The feeling of fingers on his skin sent an involuntary shiver down his spine as Hannibal carefully inspected his hand. The touch was surprisingly gentle, the stranger's fingers tracing the contours of the injury with a delicate precision that contrasted sharply with the harshness of their surroundings.

Will, a mixture of irritation and an unfamiliar vulnerability coursing through him, clenched his jaw. He could feel the warmth of Hannibal's breath against his skin as the stranger worked, the proximity unsettling in ways he refused to acknowledge.

The buzz in his stomach, a mix of defiance and something more primal, intensified with each fleeting second. When Hannibal finished tending to the cut, Will ripped his hand away with a forceful motion, his gaze avoiding the stranger's eyes.

"Are you done wastin' your damn time?" Will snapped, his voice sounding foreign to his own ears – breathy and shaky.

Hannibal, seemingly unaffected by the cowboy's brusqueness, smiled with an air of satisfaction. "That wasn't so hard, now was it?" he remarked, his maroon eyes gleaming with a knowing glint.

Will's cheeks burned with a mixture of embarrassment and frustration. "Just stay out of my damn business," he asserted.

Hannibal, still smiling, nodded in acknowledgment. "Of course, Will. As you wish," he conceded, releasing his hold on the cowboy and stepping back with a calculated grace.

The stillness was shattered by a distant sound that pricked at Will's senses. His sharp blue eyes squinted against the glaring sunlight, and he turned his head, the creaking of leather and jingle of spurs accompanying the subtle adjustment in his posture. The desolation of the desert seemed to amplify the approaching noise, the distant beat of hooves growing louder with each passing moment.

Will's hand instinctively found the grip of his colt, fingers curling around the familiar weight. His gaze, trained and wary, locked onto the horizon as four figures emerged into view. The heat waves danced on the desert floor, creating mirages that distorted the approaching riders, but Will's instincts sharpened his focus.

The riders, clad in worn leather and dust-covered clothing, closed the distance. Will's jaw tightened, the lines etched on his face reflecting a mixture of caution and readiness. He exchanged a quick glance with Hannibal.

As the riders drew nearer, the contours of their faces became clearer. Mexicans, by the looks of it, their features weathered by the harshness of the desert. Will's grip on his colt tightened, the cool metal a reassuring presence against the rising tension.

The leader of the group, a weathered man with a sun-beaten face and a wide-brimmed hat pulled low, raised a hand in a gesture of peace. His eyes, dark and watchful, met Will's with a measure of caution. The other three riders, their expressions unreadable, flanked him with a subtle wariness.

Will's gaze flickered between the riders, assessing the potential threat. The West had taught him to trust no one, to be vigilant in the face of the unknown. His fingers played over the familiar notches and grooves of his colt, the weapon an extension of his survival instincts.

Will, still uneasy with the encounter, watched Hannibal with a furrowed brow as the stranger began to speak in a language unfamiliar to him. The rhythmic cadence of Spanish flowed from Hannibal's lips, and Will's irritation simmered beneath the surface.

"Saludos, amigos," Hannibal greeted, his eyes gleaming with a subtle amusement as he shifted seamlessly between English and Spanish. He gestured towards Will, a smirk playing on his lips. "Mi amigo aquí es un poco nervioso."

Will shot Hannibal a glare, his frustration mounting as the strangers chuckled at his expense.

Hannibal continued, addressing the Mexicans with a charm that transcended language barriers. He unclasped his belt, displaying the craftsmanship with a flourish. The worn leather, etched with intricate patterns, drew the eyes of the onlookers. The leader of the group nodded appreciatively.

"Un cinturón muy hermoso," the leader remarked, his gaze flickering between Hannibal and Will. He spoke to his companions, the rapid exchange of Spanish leaving Will feeling increasingly isolated.

Hannibal, undeterred by Will's obvious discomfort, engaged in a negotiation of trade. The conversation wove through the nuances of bartering, the words a dance that Will struggled to comprehend. He clenched his fists, the frustration boiling within him.

Hannibal turned his horse toward Will, a languid smile playing on his lips. "We are heading to their camp, Will," he announced in flawless English, his eyes gleaming with an air of self-assuredness.

Will's brows furrowed in a scowl, a surge of anger bubbling within him. "Are you fuckin' insane?" he snapped, his words carrying the bite of frustration. "We don't know these people, Hannibal. We're ridin' to our death."

Hannibal's smile remained intact, the lines of his face untouched by the gravity of the situation. "I am well aware of the risks, Will," he replied, his voice calm and measured. "But sometimes, one must embrace the uncertainties of life."

Will's eyes narrowed, the intensity of his gaze locking onto Hannibal. "I ain't followin' these random folks just 'cause you say so," he asserted, his tone defiant.

Hannibal's gaze never wavered. "You are free to make your own choices, Will," he stated with a nonchalant grace. "I am going, and you may come along if you wish."

Will's jaw clenched, the words tasting bitter on his tongue. "You're gonna get us killed," he muttered, his frustration and concern intertwining into a chaotic maelstrom.

Hannibal merely smiled, the placidity of his expression at odds with the gravity of Will's words. "Death comes to us all, Will. It is merely a matter of when and how," he remarked, his philosophical perspective unsettling in its detached acceptance.

Will cursed under his breath, the tension mounting between them like the oppressive heat of the desert sun. He shook his head, as if trying to dispel the incredulity that lingered in his mind. "You're a son of a bitch," he spat, his words dripping with a mixture of resentment and disbelief.

Hannibal's smile widened, a subtle amusement dancing in his eyes. "So I've been told," he conceded.

The two men locked eyes, a silent battle of wills playing out beneath the unrelenting sun. Will's gaze, fierce and unwavering, clashed with Hannibal's composed stare. The air seemed to thicken with the unspoken tension that hung between them.

With a shake of his head, Will broke the gaze, his eyes narrowing as he focused on the path ahead. "This is fuckin' suicide," he muttered, more to himself than to Hannibal, the ominous foreboding settling like a heavy weight in the pit of his stomach.

Hannibal, seemingly unfazed by the impending risks, nudged his horse forward, falling into step beside Will.

The relentless sun bore down on them, the desert stretching endlessly beneath the cloudless sky as Will and Hannibal rode toward the distant camp. With each passing mile, Will's unease grew, his senses on high alert, eyes darting warily at the strangers ahead. The journey through

the unforgiving terrain seemed to stretch into an eternity, and the anticipation of the unknown gnawed at Will's nerves.

A heavy sigh escaped Will's lips as he rubbed a calloused hand over his face, the weariness etched into the lines of his expression. Beside him, Hannibal rode with an almost meditative calm, as if impervious to the mounting tension in the air.

"You'd do well to calm down, Will," Hannibal remarked, his voice a low murmur that cut through the uneasy silence.

Will rolled his eyes in response. "Easy for you to say. We're ridin' into God knows what, and you're actin' like we're just takin' a leisurely stroll through the countryside."

Hannibal's lips curled into a smile. "In a way, we are. A stroll through the uncertainties of life can be quite enlightening."

Will grunted in disbelief, the notion of enlightenment seeming inconceivable in the harsh reality of their world. "You and your damn enlightenment," he muttered under his breath.

Hannibal turned the conversation in a different direction. "You wondered of my proficiency in Spanish," he began, his eyes meeting Will's. "I had quite the education as a child, learning various languages and immersing myself in different cultures."

Will raised an eyebrow, his curiosity piqued despite his lingering distrust. "Why the hell would you bother with that sort of learnin'?" he asked, a note of skepticism in his tone.

Hannibal's gaze turned contemplative. "Knowledge, Will, opens doors to understanding. It provides insight into the intricacies of human nature and connects us to the vast tapestry of the world."

Will scoffed, unimpressed by Hannibal's philosophical musings. "You sound like one of them fancy professors back in the day. I reckon most folks out here don't care 'bout understandin'

human nature."

Hannibal nodded in acknowledgment, his eyes gleaming with a knowing wisdom. "Survival is a pursuit rooted in the essence of human nature. The drive to endure, adapt, and conquer the challenges of existence."

Will's lips quirked into a cynical smile. "You really do like hearin' yourself talk, don't you?"

Hannibal chuckled, a sound that resonated with an air of self-awareness. "Language, Will, is a tool—a weapon, if you will. The more proficient one is with it, the more effectively they can navigate the complexities of life."

Will huffed in response, his attention drifting to the vast expanse of the desert. "I reckon my language is more straightforward. Less fancy words, more plain truths."

Hannibal's gaze lingered on Will, a silent acknowledgment of their differences. "It has its merits, no doubt," he conceded, a glimmer of respect underlying his words.

Curiosity prompted Will to redirect the conversation, his eyes narrowing at Hannibal. "So, what brought a man like you to the West? Ain't exactly a place for fancy folks."

Hannibal's smile held a hint of mystery. "The same reason as you, I presume."

Will scoffed, finding Hannibal's answer lacking in transparency. "I doubt that," he muttered.

Hannibal, undeterred, shifted the focus back to Will. "And do you speak any other languages, Will?"

"I know some sentences in French, I reckon. Ain't much, but it gets the job done."

Hannibal's eyes lit up with an unexpected enthusiasm. "Say something in French, then," he urged, his curiosity evident.

Will grinned, a mischievous glint in his eyes. "Va te faire enculer," he declared, the words rolling off his tongue with a certain satisfaction.

Hannibal tsked, feigning disapproval. "I should have expected less from you, Will," he remarked, a hint of amusement playing on his lips.

Heat crept onto Will's cheeks, an unwelcome blush betraying his attempt at nonchalance. He shook his head, cursing himself for falling into Hannibal's playful trap.

The camp came into view with the fading light of the day, the shadows stretching across the sandy ground like fingers reaching out from the depths of the desert. Will's keen eyes studied every detail, his furrowed brow a testament to the wariness that gripped him. As the horses slowed to a stop, he dismounted with a practiced ease, casting an ever-watchful gaze over the surroundings.

The Mexicans' camp lay before them, a makeshift haven in the unforgiving wilderness. It buzzed with life and activity as the dwindling sunlight cast an amber hue on the scene. Will's fingers itched at the handle of his colt, a familiar reassurance against the uncertainties that lingered in the air. He couldn't shake the nagging suspicion that danger loomed in the guise of camaraderie.

As they approached the campfire, Will hovered around Hannibal, his protective instincts kicking in. The stranger seemed unfazed, his composure unwavering as he surveyed the scene with an air of detached interest. Hannibal patted the spot next to him, a nonchalant invitation for Will to join him.

With a grumble, Will reluctantly took a seat beside Hannibal. The clay cup of water pressed into his hands felt foreign, an uncomfortable reminder of the dependency that survival often demanded. He sipped the water slowly, his eyes scanning the dancing flames of the campfire.

The rhythmic beat of drums and the melodic hum of laughter surrounded them as the Mexicans engaged in a carefree celebration. They danced and sang, momentarily escaping the harsh reality that lingered beyond the confines of their camp. Will, however, felt an unsettling sense of displacement. The scene before him seemed like a mirage from a bygone era, a stark contrast to the desolation that had become the norm.

His gaze shifted to Hannibal, who sat beside him with an almost childlike delight in his eyes. The firelight played upon the older man's features, casting a warm glow that mirrored the stars in the night sky. Will's heart jolted, a sensation he tried to dismiss as mere annoyance. Yet, as he watched Hannibal's delighted smile, he couldn't deny the magnetic pull that tugged at something deep within him.

The fire crackled, its dance reflecting in Hannibal's eyes. Will's lips twitched involuntarily, a response to the unexpected warmth that emanated from the older man. He frowned, resenting the vulnerability that threatened to surface in the face of Hannibal's unabashed joy.

With a huff, Will tore his gaze away from Hannibal and focused on the dancing figures around the campfire

As the night unfolded, a gruff man approached, his gait marked by a weathered toughness earned on the unforgiving roads of the West. Will's eyes flicked to the newcomer, his curiosity piqued. The man settled beside them, his gaze scrutinizing Will and Hannibal with an intensity that cut through the dim light.

Will's posture tensed slightly, but he made eye contact with the man, his demeanor a blend of wariness and reluctant acknowledgment. The man, with a Mexican accent tinting his English, began weaving tales of the perilous roads he'd traversed, encountering men like Will and Hannibal along the way.

"There are many like you," the man mused, his words heavy with the burden of countless encounters on the unforgiving roads. "Men who walk the line between the living and the dead, men pursued by the devil himself."

“Months back,” he began, his voice a low murmur that mingled with the crackling flames, “I sent my men on a journey. Supplies were scarce, and we needed to scour the land for any signs of salvation. Two days passed, and one of my men returned, bloodied and half-dead on his horse.”

The air around the campfire seemed to thicken with anticipation as the men leaned in, captivated by the unfolding narrative. Will’s gaze remained fixed on the storyteller, his senses attuned to every word.

The man continued, his eyes reflecting the distant horrors he was about to unveil. “He chanted, ‘Los mató a todos.’ He killed them all,” he recounted, the words hanging in the night air like a haunting refrain.

A silence settled, a weighty pause before the man chuckled, seemingly dismissing the gravity of his own words. “He screamed of a man with eyes black as night. I have never seen someone so afraid in my life.”

"He roams these lands, my friends," the man continued, his voice a gravelly cadence that seemed to carry the weight of the vast desert itself. "He comes to collect the debts of men who have lost their way. Merciless, pure evil."

Will's gaze hardened, his skepticism evident. He'd heard his fair share of ominous tales, but the notion of a devil wandering the desolate landscape seemed a fanciful exaggeration. Still, he listened, drawn into the narrative that unfolded in the hushed tones of the storyteller.

"Not many have seen his face and lived to tell the tale," the man continued, his eyes lingering on Hannibal with a thoughtful intensity. "But some say he is beautiful. Handsome, like a serpent tempting you with forbidden fruit. A shape-shifter, they say. No one can tell what he is."

Hannibal listened intently, the glint in his eye mirroring the flickering firelight. His snake-like smile persisted, an unsettling display of amusement in the face of tales that would send shivers down most men's spines.

Will watched Hannibal with a mixture of fascination and disquiet. The man's words seemed to have ensnared Hannibal's attention, and Will found himself captivated by the play of emotions on the older man’s face. Hannibal's eyes, pools of darkness illuminated by the campfire, flickered like stars in the pitch-black night.

As the man continued his narrative, Will felt an unexpected desire coil within him. It was a heavy, unfamiliar sensation, stirring in his chest like a restless serpent. The tales of the devil collecting debts resonated with a truth that struck a nerve, awakening a yearning within Will that he couldn't quite comprehend.

The memories of how he found Hannibal, the man who claimed to be collecting debts, flashed through Will's mind. His chest tightened as he took a deep breath, grappling with the conflicting emotions that surged within him. The desire, the fear, the uncertainty—all intertwined in a complex dance that echoed the stories spun by the gruff man.

Hannibal, unaffected by the weight of the narrative, met Will's gaze with a subtle challenge.

The night hung heavy with a quiet tension as Will stood near his horse, a mixture of restlessness and uncertainty knotting his gut. He took a deep breath, the cool desert air filling his lungs. He could feel the weight of Hannibal's presence approaching, a subtle disturbance in the stillness of the night.

As Hannibal came up behind him, Will's senses heightened. The proximity of the older man, the awareness of his nearness, sent a shiver down Will's spine. He knew he was being irrational, that the question lingering on the tip of his tongue was steeped in madness, but he couldn't help himself.

"Why haven't you killed me?" Will whispered, the words escaping him like a fleeting breath. There was a strange vulnerability in the question, an admission of a truth Will wasn't quite ready to confront.

Hannibal's response, a soft murmur that caressed the edges of the night, caught Will off guard. "What a waste that would be."

Will's breath hitched at the sound of Hannibal's voice, a velvet murmur that danced on the fringes of danger and allure. For a moment, he forgot why he had come to the post, the purpose of his restless energy. The air seemed charged with an unspoken tension as Hannibal stood behind him, a silent spectator to the turmoil that churned within Will.

Finally, Will turned, his eyes meeting Hannibal's in the dim light of the night. The darkness seemed to pool in Hannibal's eyes, turning them a shade of black that sent a shiver through Will's frame. The memories of Hannibal's fury, the blood smeared on his mouth, flickered in the recesses of Will's mind. He knew, deep down, that this was a perilous path, a journey into the unknown that could only end in chaos.

Swallowing against the tightness in his throat, Will spoke, the conviction in his words belying the turmoil within. "We're getting out of here."

Hannibal, instead of offering resistance or protest, reached out, his hand cupping Will's face with an almost reverent gentleness. Will's breath hitched at the unexpected gesture, the warmth of Hannibal's palm against his skin sending a cascade of conflicting emotions through him.

The touch was both intimate and possessive, Hannibal's fingers tracing the contours of Will's skin with a deliberate intent. He studied Will with a tilt of his head, his dark eyes unblinking, as if searching for something elusive.

In that suspended moment, the world seemed to shrink, narrowing down to the space between them. The desert night whispered secrets, and the distant firelight painted shadows on their faces. Will swallowed, the tension between them thickening, the air charged with an unspoken understanding.

Hannibal's smile, a subtle curve of his lips, hinted at a revelation. Whatever he sought, he seemed to find in the depths of Will's gaze.

Chapter End Notes

translations <3
Saludos, amigos - Hello, friends
Mi amigo aquí es un poco nervioso - My friend here is a little nervous
Un cinturón muy hermoso - A very beautiful belt
Va te faire enculer - Fuck you / Go fuck yourself

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

this chapter is 7k words :o cowboy will graham is holding me at gunpoint

The air hung heavy with unspoken words, and Will fidgeted in his saddle, unable to shake off the strange unease that had settled over him since their departure from the Mexican camp.

Clearing his throat for what felt like the hundredth time, Will shot a sidelong glance at Hannibal, his cheeks still tinged with an embarrassing blush that refused to dissipate. Not a word had passed between them, and the stifling silence made Will feel like a coiled spring ready to snap at any moment.

Hannibal, ever composed, finally broke the uncomfortable quiet with a casual inquiry. "Do you have something in your throat, Will?" he asked, his voice carrying a hint of amusement.

Will stammered in response, the awkwardness of the situation amplifying his usual gruff demeanor. "No," he managed to mutter, casting a furtive glance at Hannibal. The older man's knowing smile only fueled Will's discomfort, intensifying the inexplicable tension that hung between them.

As they rode side by side, Will's gaze remained fixed on the dusty ground, studying the scattered bones of animals long gone. The beat of hooves on the desert floor played a steady background to the palpable awkwardness, and Will found himself yearning for a distraction from the unsettling thoughts that churned within him.

He swallowed, his eyes catching a small puddle of water in the distance. The idea of breaking the oppressive silence spurred Will into action. "We should stop, let the horses drink," he suggested, his voice a touch too eager. Without waiting for Hannibal's response, Will steered his horse away, dismounting near the oasis.

Will watched his horse drink, avoiding eye contact with the murky reflection in the small puddle. The desert sun bore down on them, intensifying the quiet awkwardness that hung between him and Hannibal. As the older man joined him by the water, Will half-expected to see a devilish creature reflected in the surface—a dark entity with horns and skin black as night. Yet, all he saw was Hannibal, his usual composed self.

"You killed those men, didn't you?" Will's voice cut through the silence, his eyes fixed on the puddle. Hannibal's response was a contemplative hum, the only acknowledgment of the accusation.

Will swallowed, the nervous lump in his throat refusing to dissipate. His mind echoed with the words of the gruff man from the Mexican camp, describing a devil with eyes as black as night.

Hannibal tilted his head, his gaze fixed on Will. "Does it frighten you, Will?" he inquired, his voice a low murmur that rode the desert breeze.

Will clenched his jaw, torn between the instinct to deny fear and the raw truth that whispered beneath the surface. "No," he replied tersely, the lie tasting bitter on his tongue. He wasn't sure if he feared Hannibal, but there was an undeniable apprehension, a primal instinct warning him of the man at his side.

"Why did you spare that man?" Will's voice cut through the stillness once more, probing into the mystery of Hannibal's actions. He felt a chill run down his spine, a premonition that Hannibal had spared the man deliberately, perhaps for reasons that went beyond simple survival.

Hannibal's lips curled into a slow, contemplative smile. "I wanted to see what would happen," he admitted, his eyes gleaming with a mischievous glint. The admission sent a shiver down Will's spine, the realization settling like a heavy stone in the pit of his stomach.

Suppressing the urge to clear his throat again, Will was taken off guard as Hannibal spoke again with a smirk. "I am not the devil, Will," he declared, amusement dancing in his maroon eyes.

Will grunted in acknowledgment, a small smile quirking at the corner of his lips. "Never thought you were," he lied.

"Dante, a poet from the 14th century, wrote about his imagined journey through the afterlife," Hannibal began, his voice a low, melodic cadence. "He was guided by the Roman poet Virgil, who had been dead for centuries by then."

Will grunted again, acknowledging Hannibal's words, though the connection between Dante and Virgil seemed distant and irrelevant in their current world. The notion of wandering through hell felt eerily familiar, given the circumstances they found themselves in.

"Virgil was Dante's guide, a symbol of reason and human virtue," Hannibal continued, his eyes gleaming with a certain fervor. "Their relationship was complex, transcending the boundaries of mentorship. There was an undeniable connection, a shared journey through the darkest recesses of the human experience."

Will frowned, contemplating the implications of such a bond. "So, Virgil guided Dante through hell, and they shared some sort of connection?" he asked, seeking clarity amid the layers of metaphor and allegory.

Hannibal's response was nuanced, a subtle smile gracing his lips. "Yes, Virgil led Dante through the circles of hell, offering wisdom and guidance. Their relationship was multifaceted, built on trust, admiration, and perhaps, a certain love that transcended the mortal realm."

Will's brows furrowed in confusion. "Love?" he echoed, his tone betraying a hint of skepticism.

Hannibal's eyes sparkled with intellectual excitement. "Indeed, Will. Dante's Inferno delves into the complexities of love in its various forms. The love of God, the love of country, the love of self, and the tragic love between Dante and Virgil. It is a profound exploration of human nature."

Will grunted, a mix of understanding and reservation coloring his expression. The desert landscape stretched before them, an unending sea of sand and solitude. As they mounted their horses to resume their journey, the philosophical weight of their conversation lingered in the air, a silent companion beneath the vast expanse of the desert sky.

A question, however, remained unanswered. "So, which one of us is Virgil, and which one of us is Dante?" Will asked, a note of curiosity lingering in his tone.

Hannibal's gaze held a contemplative glint as he considered the analogy. "Perhaps, Will, it is a role we both share. We guide each other."

Will shot Hannibal a sidelong glance. The wind whispered through the emptiness around them, carrying the weight of their unspoken words into the horizon.

Will engaged in the monotonous but necessary practice of lassoing. His movements were a dance of precision and muscle memory, the loop of his lasso spinning through the air with calculated ease. Yet, despite the rhythmic repetition, an underlying restlessness gnawed at him.

Out of the corner of his eye, Will observed Hannibal, seated cross-legged with an air of serene tranquility that masked an ever-present alertness. The man seemed almost on the verge of sleep, his eyes closed as if attuned to a deeper realm, yet Will knew better than to underestimate the predator within.

The urge to disrupt Hannibal's apparent tranquility overcame Will's restraint. A mischievous grin played on his lips as he selected a fresh target for his lasso. Will swung the loop with practiced precision, the rope sailing through the air before settling around Hannibal's shoulders.

As the lasso tightened, Hannibal's eyes snapped open, the maroon orbs locking onto Will with an intensity that spoke of both annoyance and a lingering amusement. Will chuckled, his

grin widening as he approached Hannibal, the captive of his game.

"Gotcha," Will declared, a note of triumph in his gravelly voice. He stood over Hannibal, the taut lasso between them.

Hannibal, his gaze unyielding, grumbled, "Release me, Will."

Will laughed, a hearty sound that reverberated across the landscape. "Now, where's the fun in that?" he retorted, tightening the lasso just a bit more for good measure.

Hannibal's eyes narrowed, a subtle glint of irritation beneath the calm exterior. "I fail to see the purpose of this juvenile display," he remarked, his tone clipped.

Will grinned down at Hannibal, the satisfaction of having momentarily disrupted the man's composed demeanor evident in his expression.

Will's chuckle lingered in the air as he crouched beside the still-lassoed Hannibal, the tether connecting them in a strange dance of camaraderie and tension.

"What were you doin’ in that mind of yours, stranger?" Will inquired, the grin still playing on his lips as he studied Hannibal's composed expression.

Hannibal, bound by the lasso but undeterred in spirit, responded with a calm demeanor. "Release me, and I will gladly share the intricacies of my thoughts."

Will raised an eyebrow, his grin evolving into a smirk. "No deal, Hannibal. You spill the beans first, then maybe I'll think about lettin' you loose."

Hannibal huffed, the slightest hint of annoyance coloring his features. "Is this your idea of an interrogation, Will? A game of bartering for information?"

Will shrugged nonchalantly, the cowboy hat casting a shadow over his eyes. "Call it what you want. Just spill."

Hannibal, seemingly resigned to the terms of the exchange, sighed theatrically. "Very well. In the recesses of my mind, I have constructed a 'mind palace.'"

Will's brows furrowed, the term unfamiliar to him. "Mind palace? What is that supposed to be?"

Hannibal, ever the eloquent speaker, began to unravel the concept. "It is a mental construct, a palace within the confines of my mind. A vast expanse of rooms, each containing memories, thoughts, and experiences. I can traverse this palace at will, reliving moments or exploring the recesses of my consciousness without physically moving."

Will's eyes widened with both curiosity and skepticism. "You're tellin' me you got a whole world inside that head of yours? Sounds like a load of bull."

Hannibal laughed, the sound carrying an air of amusement. "Think of it as a repository of knowledge and recollections. A place where I can retreat to, ponder, and revisit the vast land of my past."

Will scratched his head, grappling with the abstract concept. "So, you're sayin' you can be anywhere in the world without movin' an inch?"

Hannibal nodded, the lasso not impeding the subtle grace in his movements. "Precisely."

Will's skepticism persisted, his gaze narrowing. "Sounds like a fancy way of sayin' you daydream a lot."

Hannibal's smirk persisted. "One might view it as a sophisticated form of daydreaming, yes."

Will's gaze flickered over the landscape as he hummed in contemplation. "Must be nice, havin' a place like that to escape to," Will mused, his tone a mix of curiosity and wistfulness. "Where were you just now, in that fancy palace of yours?"

Hannibal's grin widened, and he rose to his feet, the lasso still serving as a tenuous link between them. Will stood with him.

Hannibal loomed over Will, a predatory grace in his movements. Will, despite himself, felt a subtle shift in the atmosphere, like a gathering storm on the horizon.

With a flirty purr that sent a shiver down Will's spine, Hannibal confessed, "I was remembering our first meeting, Will."

Will tightened his grip on the lasso, the rope a tangible extension of the unspoken tension between them. He raised an eyebrow, challenging Hannibal to elaborate on the memories that danced behind his maroon eyes.

Hannibal's voice lowered, an intimate cadence that seemed to echo. "I was thinking about your anger, the way your blue eyes were almost as dark as the sea during a storm," he continued, his words a seductive caress. "How you showed no mercy as you put your knife to my jugular."

A blush crept onto Will's cheeks, the unexpected compliment laced with a danger that simultaneously repelled and fascinated him. He felt the coil of something unfamiliar in his chest, a turbulent mix of emotions that defied easy definition.

Without overthinking, Will pulled on the lasso, causing Hannibal to stumble closer. In an instant, they were pressed chest to chest, the desert wind whispering through the silence that enveloped them. Will could feel the heat radiating between them, a palpable tension that seemed to defy the laws of the arid landscape.

For a moment, they remained entangled, the energy swirling around them like a dust devil in the twilight. Will tore himself away, loosening the rope around Hannibal. He took a deep breath, the taste of adrenaline lingering on his lips.

"You're playin' with fire, Hannibal," Will muttered, his voice carrying a warning that betrayed his own uncertainty.

Hannibal, undeterred, flashed a wolfish grin. "Fire can be a beautiful thing, Will. It warms, it illuminates, and sometimes, it consumes."

Hannibal gracefully removed the lasso from his shoulders. His maroon eyes gleamed as he grinned at Will, a calculated playfulness that mirrored the dance of light and shadow around them.

"You are so guarded, Will, like a prickly mongoose," Hannibal remarked, his voice carrying a teasing lilt.

Will snorted, the corner of his mouth quirking in a half-smile. "If I'm a mongoose, then you must be the snake," he retorted, his eyes narrowing playfully. "You know what mongoose's do to snakes, right?"

Hannibal's grin widened, and he purred, "Yes, Will. They kill them."

Will crouched by the barrel cacti, his hat shielding his face from the relentless heat. The spiky succulents stretched upward, their green skin concealing the precious fruit within. Hannibal loomed behind him, his presence like a subtle shadow.

"Make sure there are no glochids," Hannibal advised, his voice a low murmur.

Will shot him a scowl over his shoulder. "Don't you think I know that?" he grumbled, his hands deftly navigating the spines to pluck the fruit.

Hannibal, seemingly unperturbed by Will's brusque response, watched with an air of detached interest.

Collecting a handful of barrel cactus fruit, Will ambled back to where their horses were tethered. A flick of his knife sliced into the tough skin of the fruit, revealing the refreshing pulp within.

The rhythmic sound of the blade against the fruit filled the air as Will worked, the repetition providing a sense of normalcy in their perilous existence. However, a lingering tension simmered beneath the surface.

Will's mind echoed with the reminder of his words to Hannibal – the declaration that the older man would need to find his own food. The exchange had been a testament to Will's determination to maintain a certain level of autonomy, a boundary he was reluctant to breach.

As he cut into the fruit, the blade biting through the succulent flesh, Will glanced up at Hannibal. The older man stood with a quiet elegance, the vastness of the desert stretching behind him. His eyes held an innocent curiosity that belied the complex dynamics at play.

The silence between them felt heavy, pregnant with unspoken words and uncharted territories. Will, meeting Hannibal's gaze, narrowed his eyes, a silent accusation aimed at the figure before him.

Hannibal, ever the provocateur, maintained an expression of feigned innocence. His eyes held a glint of mischief, a spark that danced in the harsh sunlight.

The prolonged gaze between them stretched until Will, feeling the heat creep up his face, decided to break the silent exchange. He thrust his knife into another piece of fruit and extended it toward Hannibal.

"Here," Will said, the single word carrying an undercurrent of unspoken thoughts.

Hannibal, meeting Will's gaze with an almost predatory gleam in his eyes, acknowledged the offering with a quiet "Thank you." He leaned forward and took a bite directly from the blade of Will's knife.

The sight of Hannibal's lips wrapping around the blade sent an unexpected shudder through Will. His cheeks burned hotter, and he tore his gaze away, focusing on the task of retrieving another piece of fruit for himself.

"How long have you been traveling alone, Will?" Hannibal inquired, his eyes studying the cowboy beside him.

Will, with a nonchalant shrug, replied, "Years. Lost count, to be honest."

The corners of Hannibal's lips twitched upward, a subtle acknowledgment of the shared solitude each man had found in the unforgiving terrain. Will, observing Hannibal's gaze, allowed a small smile to play on his lips.

"And you?" Will asked, curiosity in his eyes.

Hannibal's shrug held an air of mystery. "Quite a while. I have traveled with people, and sometimes, I prefer the company of solitude."

Will couldn't help but be intrigued. "What happened to the folks you traveled with?"

Hannibal's grin took on a wicked edge, a glimpse into the shadows of his past. "Life has a way of parting paths, whether by choice or circumstance. It is the way of the world, isn't it?"

The cowboy acknowledged the truth in Hannibal's words with a nod, the desert breeze whispering secrets that only the sand dunes bore witness to. Hannibal observed Will with a

curiosity that matched the cowboy's own.

Hannibal posed a more direct question. "How many people have you killed, Will?"

Will's expression shifted, a flicker of contemplation crossing his features. "Can't rightly say. I don't keep count. Killing's just a thing I do when it needs doing. No more emotion in it than saddling a horse or mending a fence."

Hannibal, ever the provocateur, leaned in, his gaze probing. "Is it truly that mechanical for you? No remorse, no hesitation?"

Will's eyes, a shade of blue as deep as the western sky, met Hannibal's with an unsettling calmness. "Remorse and hesitation won't keep you alive out here. It's survival, plain and simple."

Hannibal, humming softly to himself, spoke up, "I have to disagree with you, Will."

Will huffed, a wry smile playing on his lips. "Well, of course you do."

Hannibal's eyes sparkled as he continued, "I like to indulge, you see. Just because God decided to give us this harsh existence does not mean we have to live in perpetual misery. There is still beauty in all this ugliness, if you care to look for it. Not all those who wander are lost."

Will tilted his head at Hannibal, the lines of his face softened by the sun. He mulled over Hannibal's words, the philosophical twist to them, and finally said, "I don't think I'm lost, not really."

Hannibal, with a curious glint in his eyes, posed a question. "Do you have a destination, Will?"

A heavy sigh escaped Will's lips, and he admitted, "No. Can't say I do."

Hannibal's smile remained, a genuine expression that lit up his features. "And what about you?" Will shot back. "Do you have a destination?"

Hannibal's gaze, intense and contemplative, met Will's. "A destination of sorts," he said cryptically.

Rolling his eyes at Hannibal's vague response, Will decided to take matters into his own hands. With a mischievous grin, he reached up and swiftly slapped Hannibal's hat down, covering his probing eyes. "Guess you're not seeing much of that destination right now, are you?"

Hannibal laughed, adjusting his hat and peering at Will from beneath the brim. "You have a peculiar way of proving your points, Will."

Will shrugged, a nonchalant grin on his face. "I call it making a statement."

The old farm house stood silent and dilapidated, its weathered wooden beams groaning under the weight of time. Will and Hannibal, like scavengers in a ghostly world, sifted through the remnants of another era. Dust hung in the air as they unearthed relics of the past: worn-out clothes, rusted tools, and, to their surprise, two dusty bottles of whiskey.

Will picked up one bottle, examining it with a critical eye. He turned it in his hands, considering where to stash it among his meager belongings. However, when faced with the dilemma of a second bottle, his practicality hit a roadblock.

Hannibal, always with a keen eye for opportunity, suggested, "Why not indulge in a moment of reprieve, Will?"

Will frowned, shaking his head. "There's no point in drinkin’ it, Hannibal. What if we have to fight off walkers, or worse, while we're drunk off our asses? Our guards need to be up."

Hannibal's response was smooth, the words carrying a persuasive lilt. "We do not have to get drunk, Will."

Will recoiled inwardly at the idea of lowering his guard around Hannibal. He couldn't predict what the man would do, and more troublingly, he wasn't sure of his own actions when drunk. He glanced up at Hannibal, biting his lip, feeling the struggle within himself.

Hannibal, sensing the internal conflict, offered a subtle smile. "You do not have to live in misery just because the world does, Will."

"Please," Hannibal added, his gaze holding a mixture of earnestness and charm.

Will sighed, a reluctant surrender as he relented, "Fine."

He rolled his eyes at the triumphant smile that crept onto Hannibal's face. The decision was made, and the prospect of that fleeting escape seemed oddly inviting.

The barren living room of the farmhouse offered little in terms of comfort. Dust hung in the air, the sun's rays piercing through cracks in the wooden panels. Will scratched his head, surveying the room with a hesitant expression, his unease palpable.

Hannibal, ever composed, settled down on the floor with an air of ease. He took a measured sip from the bottle of whiskey, the liquid amber catching the faint light in the dim room. Will, feeling oddly out of place, stammered, "Is it good?"

A small smile played on Hannibal's lips as he replied, "Quite."

Will cursed himself for the awkwardness. He watched Hannibal's fingers delicately wrapped around the bottle and felt a strange shiver when their hands brushed as Hannibal passed him the whiskey.

Taking a sip, Will closed his eyes at the familiar sting in his throat. "Can't remember the last time I had whiskey," he admitted, the admission carrying a tinge of nostalgia.

Hannibal, ever the connoisseur of moments, suggested, "Perhaps we should make a toast."

Will chuckled, his unease dissipating slightly. "What the hell are we gonna toast to?"

Hannibal tilted his head thoughtfully. "To indulgence."

Will shrugged, a bemused smile on his face. "You're weird, you know that?"

Hannibal's eyes glinted with amusement. "Weird is relative, Will. In a world where the dead walk, normalcy is a quaint notion."

The bottle passed back and forth between them, the whiskey warming them from the inside out. Will felt the edges of sobriety blur, a sensation he wasn't entirely comfortable with, but the allure of the warmth spreading through his chest made it difficult to resist.

Leaning back, Will tilted his hat over one eye, his gaze fixed on Hannibal. The light accentuated the contours of the older man's features, shadows playing across his face as he took measured sips from the bottle.

Feeling the effects of the alcohol, Will shifted and mustered the courage to breach a topic he hadn't delved into before. "You got any family?" he asked, his words slightly slurred.

Hannibal's response was delayed, and Will waited patiently for the revelation. "My parents died when I was very young," Hannibal finally admitted, his voice carrying the weight of memories.

Will nodded in understanding, the shared burden of loss resonating between them. "Siblings?" he pressed on.

Hannibal took a sip from the whiskey before answering, "I had a sister."

Interest piqued, Will leaned forward slightly. "What was she like?"

A soft smile graced Hannibal's lips, his eyes gazing into the past. "Beautiful, courageous, always curious about everything and anything."

Will's own smile mirrored Hannibal's description. "Sounds like a nice girl."

Hannibal's eyes softened with a mix of nostalgia and something deeper. "She was."

The air between them hung heavy with unspoken truths. Will, in his inebriated state, couldn't help but feel a connection to Hannibal's past, a glimpse into a life that existed before the world turned into a barren wasteland.

As the whiskey bottle exchanged hands once more, the amber liquid casting a warm glow in the dimly lit room, Hannibal's question hung in the air like a ghost. "Did you have family, Will?"

Will sighed, the sound escaping him as if he were releasing the weight of the world. Closing his eyes, he delved into the recesses of his mind, seeking a memory that held the warmth of his father. It was a delicate dance, picking through the fragments of the past, avoiding the sharp edges of grief. Finally, a particular memory surfaced, one that brought a bittersweet smile to Will's face.

"My dad," Will began, his voice carrying the echo of the past. "He taught me how to aim this damn gun." He gestured toward the firearm at his side, the metal glinting in the dim light of the farmhouse.

Hannibal leaned back, his eyes gleaming with curiosity as he welcomed the tale. "Go on," he encouraged, the whiskey-fueled camaraderie weaving through the air.

Will chuckled, the memory unfolding before him like a sepia-toned photograph. "Took me forever to shoot some damn bottles. I was too jittery, too eager to prove I could do it."

Hannibal's laughter rumbled, a melodic accompaniment to Will's narrative. "The trials of youth."

Will smirked, the lines on his face softening with the weightless joy of reminiscence. "Yep. Pa had a way of making me feel like a complete idiot, but damn, he had patience."

Hannibal's eyes locked onto Will's, the shared understanding of relationships resonating between them. "Patience is a virtue, especially when it comes to imparting wisdom."

Will nodded, taking a swig of the whiskey before passing it back to Hannibal. "He wasn't perfect, but he did his best. Can't ask for much more in this world."

The silence settled between them, thick and contemplative, like the dust kicked up by a passing storm that lingered long after the winds had ceased. Will's gaze wandered across the dimly lit room, tracing the contours of abandoned furniture and long-forgotten memories etched into the walls. The whiskey's warmth lingered in his chest.

He spared a sidelong glance at Hannibal, and in that moment of inadvertent connection, their eyes met. A spark, elusive and fleeting, passed between them like the glint of a shooting star in the night sky. Will's breath caught, and he could feel the flush creeping up his cheeks like the dawn breaking over the horizon.

The room seemed to shrink, the boundaries that separated them fading into the shadows cast by the flickering light. Will tore his gaze away, suddenly absorbed in the patterns of the worn wooden floor. He felt like a foolish schoolboy, his heart fluttering in his chest like the wings of a startled bird.

Uncharted territory lay before him, a landscape of emotions he had long tried to evade. The weight of that connection hung in the air, leaving Will to grapple with the unfamiliar yearning that clawed at the recesses of his guarded heart.

He couldn't name this feeling, didn't want to unravel its complexities. For now, it lingered in the quiet between them, like a fragile truce in a world gone mad. Will shifted uncomfortably, his hat tilting lower over his eyes as if it could shield him from the uncharted terrain of vulnerability.

The room echoed with the unruly melody of Will's drunken laughter, a cacophony of mirth and inebriation that swirled in the space. He stumbled and shuffled, weaving a dance that only he could comprehend. The moonlight cast erratic shadows on the walls, keeping pace with Will's intoxicated antics.

He clutched the bottle of whiskey like a prized possession, singing nonsensical lyrics to a tune that existed solely in the recesses of his inebriated mind. His laughter, hearty and unburdened, resonated with the abandon of a man who had momentarily forgotten the weight of the world outside.

Hannibal, in stark contrast, remained seated, a portrait of composure amidst the unruly spectacle. His gaze, an enigmatic pool of discernment, followed Will's every move. There was a subtle amusement in his eyes, an acknowledgment of the rare vulnerability that alcohol had elicited from the otherwise guarded cowboy.

In a sudden fit of merriment, Will tripped over an unseen obstacle, his laughter intensifying as he almost sprawled onto the floor. The whiskey bottle, a witness to the chaos, seemed to share in his revelry, clinking softly.

Hannibal rose from his seat. He approached Will with measured steps, his posture unwavering despite the playfulness that danced in his eyes. "Will, you have had enough," he declared, a note of concern softening his words.

Will waved him off with an exuberant grin, the whiskey-fueled confidence coursing through his veins. "I'm fine, Hannibal. I can handle my drink," he declared, taking another triumphant swig from the bottle.

Hannibal sighed, the subtle shake of his head revealing a blend of amusement and exasperation. "I believe my suggestion involved a moderate indulgence, not a reckless pursuit of inebriation," he chided gently, reaching for the bottle that Will defiantly kept out of his reach.

With a frown, Will sidestepped, holding the bottle aloft like a prized trophy. "You're the one who said to drink, Hannibal. Don't go back on your own words now," he retorted, his speech slightly slurred but his defiance resolute.

Hannibal regarded him with a patient sigh. "Will, there is a difference between savoring a moment and drowning in it. I fear you are edging toward the latter," he remarked.

Will chuckled, a touch of recklessness in his voice. "I ain't drowning, Hannibal. I'm swimming. In whiskey. And it's damn refreshing," he declared, taking another swaggering step back.

Hannibal observed, his eyes gleaming with an analytical curiosity that Will had come to recognize all too well.

"What's that look for?" Will asked, a trace of defensiveness edging into his voice. He swayed slightly, still clutching the bottle as if it were a lifeline to this momentary escape.

Hannibal, ever the observer, tilted his head. "I am merely studying the human condition, Will. This version of you is... unique."

Will frowned, the mirth in his eyes replaced with a wary skepticism. "Unique? What the hell does that mean?"

"It means," Hannibal began, his tone measured, "that in this state, you have allowed yourself a glimpse of vulnerability. The laughter, the carefree abandon—it is a stark departure from the stoic cowboy facade you wear so well."

Will scowled, a mixture of frustration and intoxication swirling within him. "Can't a man enjoy a moment without you dissecting it like a damn animal?"

Hannibal's eyes lingered, unfazed by Will's protest. "It is precisely because it is a rare sight that I find it intriguing. This version of you is unburdened, unguarded. It is the essence of what it means to be human—flawed, expressive, and, above all, transient."

Will's grip on the bottle tightened, his frustration bubbling to the surface. "You talk too much. Always analyzing everything like you're some kind of damn philosopher. I'm just trying to forget, even if it's just for a moment."

Hannibal's gaze remained unwavering. "But that's precisely the point, isn't it? This revelry is your attempt at escape, a temporary departure from the harsh reality you face. And once the whiskey wears off, once this fleeting moment dissipates, you will return to the stoic cowboy, the emotional barricade firmly in place."

Will's jaw clenched, his eyes narrowing. "You don't know a damn thing about me."

Hannibal's lips curled into a small, knowing smile. "I know more than you think, Will. "

Will scowled, the effects of the whiskey amplifying his frustration. "I ain't burdened. I'm surviving. And don't pretend you understand what it's like out there. You live in your own world, with your fancy words and highfalutin ideas."

Hannibal's gaze intensified, a silent challenge in his eyes. "Survival, indeed. But at what cost, Will? At the cost of your humanity?"

Will could feel Hannibal's gaze dissecting him, laying bare the layers he had carefully concealed beneath the façade of a stoic cowboy. "What the hell are you talkin' about?" Will snapped, his words slurred with the effects of the whiskey.

Hannibal tilted his head, a faint smile playing on his lips. "You are fighting, Will. A spirited rebellion against the constraints of your own stoicism," he observed, his words precise, each syllable laden with implication.

Will's brows furrowed as the whiskey-fueled defiance hardened into something more defensive. "I'm havin' fun, Hannibal. You can't take that away," he retorted, his tone laden with stubborn resolve.

Hannibal's gaze remained unyielding, his analytical mind pressing forward. "Fun, yes. But at what cost? This momentary lapse into merriment is merely a respite from the burden you carry. A brief escape before you return to the shackles of your own emotional restraint," he explained, his words carrying an unsettling truth.

Will's jaw tightened, the tension coiling within him like a spring ready to snap. "You don't know a damn thing," he growled, the remnants of mirth replaced by a surge of anger.

Hannibal, undeterred, continued his dissection. "Your laughter is a rare melody, Will. A momentary deviation from the somber symphony you've grown accustomed to. But when the music fades, and the revelry subsides, you'll find yourself once again bound by the constraints you've erected."

A surge of frustration coursed through Will, a battle between the whiskey-induced haze and the analytical scrutiny of the man before him. "Shut the hell up, Hannibal. You're just spoutin' nonsense," he retorted.

But Hannibal persisted, his clinical gaze probing the depths of Will's resistance. "You are only fighting, Will, because this is the one time you have allowed yourself to be human. And once the illusion of revelry dissipates, you'll retreat back to the stoic cowboy with a heart locked away," he concluded.

Will's fists clenched at his sides, the onslaught of emotions exacerbated by the whiskey-induced haze.

Hannibal made a move to take the bottle from his grasp. The sudden tension between them sparked a wrestling match, a clash of wills in the dimly lit room. Will, fueled by the volatile mix of alcohol and defiance, fought tooth and nail to retain his hold on the bottle.

In a moment of calculated strength, Hannibal managed to wrench the bottle away. The glass sailed across the room, shattering into fragments. The whiskey, once a source of fleeting pleasure, now stained the floor, a symbol of the fractured moment.

Will froze as he stared at the shattered remnants of his indulgence. The room, once filled with laughter, now echoed with the heavy silence that hung between them.

"Damn it, Hannibal," Will muttered, his voice a low growl. He turned to face the older man, eyes ablaze with a fire that Hannibal's scrutiny had ignited. "You think you've got me all figured out, don't you?"

Will turned on Hannibal with a ferocity that surprised even himself. The push sent them both sprawling to the floor, a chaotic dance that ended with Will straddling the older man.

The moonlight cast an eerie glow on the scene, shadows playing on the features of Will's face as he pulled out his knife. A glint of steel caught the light, and Hannibal met Will's furious gaze with an almost unnerving calmness. Will's fingers tightened around the hilt of the knife, the blade poised dangerously close to Hannibal's throat.

"Cursed devil," Will spat, his voice low and guttural. "You think this is some kind of game, don't you?"

Hannibal's smile persisted, unwavering even in the face of the blade pressing against his throat. "Games, Will, are only as serious as the players make them," he responded, his voice a measured counterpoint to Will's simmering anger.

Will's furious eyes bore into Hannibal's, a tumultuous storm swirling within. He pressed the knife closer, the cold steel a stark reminder of the power he held in that moment. The distance between their lips was almost negligible, a dangerous proximity that threatened to tip the balance of the confrontation.

"I ain't feeling charitable now," Will growled, his voice a low rumble. "You push too damn much."

Hannibal's eyes, a deep brown that seemed to hold galaxies within, remained fixed on Will's, a silent acknowledgment of the brewing tempest. Will's grip tightened on Hannibal as he pressed the knife harder against the older man's throat, a fierce determination etched across his features.

"Think you can look at me with those big eyes all the time and not face any consequences?" Will demanded, his voice laced with a mix of anger and something deeper, something unspoken. "I'll carve the arrogance right out of you."

The room seemed to pulse with an energy entirely of its own creation, a palpable tension that electrified the air as Will, atop Hannibal, confronted the maelstrom of emotions churning within him. Pools of lust, previously dormant, surged and collided like waves against the shores of his restraint, eroding the barriers that had kept them contained.

From this vantage point, Will studied Hannibal's face with a mixture of fascination and trepidation. The play of shadows lent an ethereal quality to Hannibal's features, his visage reminiscent of the mythical gods Will had heard tales of but never dared to imagine in the flesh. Hannibal's eyes, pools of darkness, held a magnetic allure that drew Will in like a moth to the flame.

Rolling his hips in a primal gesture, Will reveled in the newfound power coursing through his veins. He felt alive in a way he hadn't known possible, the intoxicating thrill of dominance surging through him. Exhilaration mingled with uncertainty as Will struggled to make sense of the tumultuous emotions that threatened to engulf him.

Gritting his teeth, Will pressed closer, the forceful action punctuating the charged air. Hannibal, however, responded with a smile that seemed to defy the gravity of the situation. His chest rose rapidly beneath Will, a testament to the shared intensity of the moment.

The room reverberated with the echo of Will's demand, but Hannibal's response was measured and deliberate. Slowly closing his eyes, Hannibal surrendered to the intoxication of the sensation, his breath hitching in a blissful surrender. The words that escaped his lips were a breathy murmur, laced with a sincerity that left no room for doubt.

"Beautiful, Will."

Hannibal's deliberate provocation, the playful manipulation, it was all a calculated move to elicit a reaction from Will.

In that moment, as their breaths danced in tandem, Will felt a seismic shift within himself. Stars exploded, a celestial symphony playing out within the confines of his being. It was a revelation, a cascade of emotions that threatened to engulf him entirely. The fear of losing himself in the depths of Hannibal's allure clawed at the edges of his consciousness, but Will found himself unable, perhaps unwilling, to resist the pull.

His face dipped, nose nuzzling with Hannibal's. The world around them seemed to fade into insignificance as the weight of their shared vulnerability hung in the air. Will's voice, when it finally emerged from the depths of his conflicted soul, held a raw sincerity.

"Damn you," he muttered, the words a whisper against Hannibal's skin. The journey he'd been on, the numbness that had been both a shield and a prison, now lay shattered at their feet.

Hannibal's eyes, those maroon pools that had ensnared Will from the beginning, bore into him with an intensity that transcended the physical. "You do not have to be afraid," Hannibal murmured, the timbre of his voice weaving a sweetly seductive spell.

Will's gaze flickered between Hannibal's eyes and the precipice of emotions that threatened to consume him. "Afraid of what?" he retorted, a tinge of defiance coloring his words.

"Of me. Of feeling," Hannibal replied, his fingers tracing a feather-light pattern along Will's back.

Will's breath hitched, an intimate moment suspended in the hushed ambiance of the room. The realization struck him with the force of a stampeding herd: he was falling. Falling into the depths of something he couldn't fully comprehend, and the fear of losing himself in that abyss clawed at him.

The decision to distance himself, to retreat into the familiar solitude of the night, felt like a violent act of self-preservation. Will pushed himself off Hannibal, a parting that mirrored the agony of tearing away his own skin. The space between them expanded, a vast chasm filled with the residue of unspoken words and lingering desires.

In a voice that wavered more than he'd care to admit, Will stammered out an excuse. He'd sleep with the horses, offering Hannibal the refuge of the house. The words hung in the air, a threadbare veil that concealed the turmoil within.

“Will.” Hannibal's voice, a soft entreaty, called out, but Will winced at the sound, recoiling from the vulnerability that laced those syllables.

Will turned on his heels, his boots clinking softly against the floorboards, and walked outside into the crisp night air.

The night stretched out before Will like an endless expanse of uncertainty, the vastness of the desert mirroring the tumult within him. He ran his hands over his face, the roughness of his palms a stark reminder of the harsh reality he sought to escape. Fists clenched, he grappled with the chaotic tangle of emotions that threatened to consume him.

The silence of the desert enveloped him, broken only by the distant rustling of the wind through the sparse vegetation. Will's heart pounded in his chest, echoing the footsteps of a cowboy navigating treacherous terrain, both internal and external. His breath caught in his throat, caught between the desire to retreat into the safety of the familiar and the magnetic pull drawing him back to Hannibal.

He cursed softly under his breath, the words escaping like a prayer to the unforgiving night. The stars above seemed to shimmer knowingly, witnesses to the internal struggle that played out beneath their watchful gaze. The horses grazed nearby, oblivious to the storm of emotions that raged within their master.

Will's hands found refuge in the unruly waves of his hair, fingers gripping and pulling as if seeking to anchor himself in the tangible reality of his own existence. The memory of Hannibal lingered in the air, an intoxicating blend of danger and desire that lingered like a heady perfume.

In his mind's eye, he replayed the scene in the house—the tension, the wrestling of bodies, the blade pressed against Hannibal's throat. The intoxicating dance of power and vulnerability. He yearned for the simplicity of the life he once knew, where survival was measured in heartbeats and not the tangled threads of longing that threatened to unravel him.

Yet, as he imagined the taste of Hannibal's lips, the softness of the older man's skin beneath his fingertips, Will couldn't deny the undeniable truth: he craved more. The very danger he sought to evade had become a beacon, a magnetic force drawing him into uncharted territories. More than anything, Will longed to return, to taste the forbidden fruit that dangled just out of reach.

His fingers twitched, and for a moment, he considered the act of seeking solace in the intimate touch of his own flesh. He questioned his own sanity, the logic that should have guided him overridden by a newfound sense of liberation.

Will's fingertips grazed over his lips, a phantom touch that evoked the memory of what could have been. It was as if, in the perilous dance with Hannibal, he had learned to fly. The sensation both exhilarated and terrified him. How could something so dangerous feel so achingly good?

His heart echoed the name, a rhythmic chant that mirrored the cadence of hooves on a dusty trail. Hannibal, Hannibal, Hannibal.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will shuffled beside the horses, his gaze fixated on the rhythmic dance of his boots through the dusty earth. Sleep had eluded him, stolen away by the specter of Hannibal's face, those dark eyes that seemed to pierce through the darkness of the night and into the recesses of Will's unsettled mind.

The memory of Hannibal beneath him, a knife's edge tracing the contours of his throat, echoed in Will's thoughts, sending shivers down his spine. He could almost feel the weight of that moment pressing against his chest, a vivid recollection that left him breathless in the crisp morning air.

There was an absurdity in the notion that he could have ridden away, left Hannibal and the unsettling entanglement of emotions behind. Yet, Will's body remained rooted, as if the very earth beneath him conspired to keep him in this strange dance with the man who had become an unwelcome fixture in his thoughts.

He berated himself silently, a chorus of self-deprecating whispers echoing in his mind. Why hadn't he just left? Why hadn't he seized the opportunity to distance himself from the complexities that Hannibal introduced into his life? The answer lingered on the tip of his tongue, a bitter admission he refused to vocalize.

"I reckon I'm a damn fool," Will muttered to no one but the wind. The realization tasted sour, and he spat it out into the desert air, the words hanging unresolved in the stillness of the morning.

Hannibal's presence loomed like an ever-present shadow, his effect on Will undeniable. The pull, magnetic and unrelenting, made Will feel like a puppet ensnared in strings he couldn't see. He cursed himself for the vulnerability he unwittingly exposed the night before, for the pulsating desire that throbbed beneath his skin.

His hand absentmindedly reached for the handle of his colt, a grounding gesture in the midst of the turmoil within. Will wondered if he'd find answers in the steady weight of cold steel

against his fingers, or if the desert wind would carry away the nagging doubts that clung to him like the morning dew.

As Hannibal shuffled out from the farm house, Will tensed involuntarily. The scrape of boots against the sandy ground was a soft prelude to the unspoken conversation that was bound to unfold. Will's eyes flickered upwards, finding Hannibal's gaze directed elsewhere. He bit his lip, muttered a tentative "Mornin'" into the quiet morning.

Hannibal's response was calm, a polite acknowledgment of the new day. Yet, Will detected a hint of something beneath the surface, a desire for connection that mirrored his own uncertainty. He wanted to look at Hannibal, meet the other man's eyes, but fear held him captive.

Trying to break through the awkward silence, Hannibal attempted to capture Will's attention. "Will," he said, a soft plea in his voice. Will, in a reflexive move to shield himself from whatever lay behind those penetrating eyes, interrupted with a dismissive assurance, "It's fine. Don't worry 'bout it. Last night was nothin'."

But as soon as the words left his lips, Will felt the flicker of hurt in Hannibal's eyes. The realization hit him like a sudden storm, and Will cursed himself for the callousness of his words. He couldn't bear to see the pain he'd caused.

"No, that's not...that ain't what I meant," Will mumbled, his voice rough with sincerity. He dared to meet Hannibal's eyes, and the hurt reflected there cut through him like a knife. "It wasn't nothin', Hannibal. It was somethin'. I just... I don't rightly know what."

Hannibal nodded in understanding, a quiet acceptance that hung between them like the morning mist in the desert air. Will sighed, feeling the weight of the unspoken words pressing on his chest, and mounted his horse in a fluid motion.

He stole a sidelong glance at Hannibal, who was preparing his own mount.

Will's eyes fixated on the trail ahead, but the silence gnawed at him like a relentless hunger. The rhythm of hooves against the desert floor was the only melody, a stark contrast to the animated banter that once filled the void.

How ironic, Will mused, that only days ago, he'd cursed the very sound of Hannibal's voice. Now, he found himself starved for it, the emptiness echoing louder than the vast expanse surrounding them. His attempts to break the silence lingered on the tip of his tongue, but the words eluded him, slipping away like elusive specters in the night.

Chewing on the inside of his cheeks, Will's mind raced, desperately searching for a way to bridge the widening gap. The maddening quiet pressed upon him, an oppressive weight that threatened to unravel his composure. A strange sense of loss gripped him, a void left by the absence of the once-irritating conversations.

He stole a glance at Hannibal, riding beside him in stoic silence. The older man seemed lost in contemplation, a detachment that further fueled Will's frustration. The connection that had been forged in shared adversity now seemed fragile, a thread ready to snap under the mounting tension.

A surge of self-anger swept through Will. He had no idea how to mend what seemed irreparable, and that ignorance clawed at his insides. He yearned for Hannibal's eyes on him, a gaze that had become both infuriating and strangely comforting. Just yesterday, he'd wished for the silence, and now he craved Hannibal's attention, the intensity of those penetrating eyes solely focused on him.

The desert offered no solace, its vastness mirroring the desolation within. Will pondered the irony of his newfound craving for Hannibal's chatter. His fingers traced the worn edges of the reins, a tactile distraction from the tumult within. The open expanse seemed to mock him, an endless canvas where their unspoken rift stretched like a gaping wound.

As they rode side by side, Will's thoughts raced, his internal monologue a chaotic symphony of frustration and yearning. He stole another glance at Hannibal, but the older man remained wrapped in his contemplative cocoon.

Will shifted uncomfortably in his saddle, his throat dry and raspy from the desert winds. He cleared his throat, hoping to shatter the stillness that clung to them like a shroud.

"It's a hot one today," he remarked, the words almost reluctant as they broke free from his lips. A nod from Hannibal was the only acknowledgment, leaving the vacuum of conversation to engulf them once again.

The memory of Hannibal's words haunted Will's mind. "Once the illusion of revelry dissipates, you'll retreat back to the stoic cowboy with a heart locked away." Will winced, realizing that Hannibal had effortlessly pierced through his defenses, revealing the vulnerability beneath. Anger had been his initial response, a defense mechanism, but the truth of Hannibal's words lingered in the scorching air.

Damn Hannibal for seeing through him, for unraveling the carefully constructed layers that shielded his heart. A sensation of being skinned alive gnawed at him, and he couldn't shake the discomfort that came with baring his soul so openly.

But despite the discomfort, the revelation lingered. Will yearned for more than the transient camaraderie they'd shared in recent days. He wanted Hannibal's voice to cut through the silence, wanted the keen attention of those discerning eyes, craved the weight of Hannibal's words, and perhaps most perplexingly, longed for the touch that had ignited a dormant flame within.

A shudder ran through Will as he admitted to himself the truth of his desires. He wasn't going mad; he was already mad, ensnared by a longing that defied the rationality he had clung to. He cursed softly under his breath for what he was about to do.

"I was born in New Orleans," Will blurted out, the words rushing out like a dam breaking free.

A flicker of interest danced in Hannibal's eyes, a subtle shift that didn't go unnoticed by Will. It was as if the admission had breathed life into the arid air between them. Encouraged, Will continued, "Raised in the swamps, the heat. But I left. Couldn't stay."

"In New Orleans, the weather's somethin' else," Will drawled, his accent thickening as he delved into the recesses of his past. "Hotter than a panther's breath, and the air so thick, you

could cut it with a knife. But it's got a charm, a rhythm to it that gets under your skin. Makes you feel alive."

Hannibal, though still maintaining a stoic exterior, seemed attentive. Will pressed on, feeling the urgency to share, to bridge the gap between them. "I used to play in the swamps with my dad." He felt a small smile tug at the corners of his lips as he spoke of his father, a bittersweet mixture of warmth and sorrow.

The tension that had lingered between them seemed to ease, if only for a moment, as Hannibal's expression softened into a barely discernible smile. Will's heart swelled at the acknowledgment, at the understanding he glimpsed in Hannibal's eyes.

As Will continued, the words began to flow more freely. "Evenin's were the best, when the sun dipped low and the fireflies came out to play. Their light, dancin' and flickerin' like stars fallen to the earth. Dad used to say they carried the souls of the departed, guidin' them through the night."

The memories, once dormant, now took shape in the air between them. Will's voice, a melodic cadence that spoke of both joy and loss, painted vivid images of a childhood long left behind. "We'd sit on the porch, watchin' the fireflies weave their tales. Nights were warm, the air thick with sounds of creatures unseen. It felt like magic, like a world untouched by time."

Will's gaze remained on the distant landscape as he continued his tales of the swamps and fireflies, the words flowing like a gentle stream carrying memories to the surface.

Hannibal studied Will with a keen interest, his dark eyes absorbing every nuance of the cowboy's expression. Will, sensing Hannibal's curiosity, felt a warmth bloom in his chest. Perhaps it was the shared connection through memories, the realization that they both carried fragments of a past that had shaped them in ways words couldn't fully capture.

"I had fireflies back at home too," Hannibal finally spoke, breaking the silence that followed Will's narrative. "Mischa and I used to chase them in the garden. She loved the delicate glow, the way they lit up the night. Her happiness rivaled the glow of those fireflies." There was a softness in Hannibal's tone, a fondness that touched the edges of nostalgia.

Will nodded in understanding, the bond of shared experiences threading its way between them. The tension that had haunted their interactions seemed to loosen its grip, allowing for a moment of respite.

Hannibal's gaze never wavered from Will's. "I believe Mischa would have liked you, Will," Hannibal admitted, his words carrying a weight of sincerity. Will felt a lump in his throat, a mixture of gratitude and a poignant ache for a past he could never share.

Will smiled, a genuine expression that transformed his face, revealing a side rarely seen. The corners of his mouth pulled upwards, showing his teeth in a gesture of unguarded openness "Well, I reckon she had good taste then," Will replied, a hint of playfulness in his voice. Hannibal, in response, mirrored Will's smile, the lines on his face softening.

The old hotel stood as a crumbling relic, its walls weathered and peeling. Dust hung in the air, dancing in the pale light that filtered through the decaying boards. Will and Hannibal moved cautiously through the dilapidated structure, the creaking floorboards beneath their boots echoing with each step.

Will couldn't shake the weariness that gripped him—the fear that one wrong move might send the entire structure crashing down. He cast wary glances at the exposed beams, as if trying to decipher the silent language of their impending collapse.

They sifted through the remnants of forgotten lives—a faded photograph, a cracked mirror, a tarnished pocket watch. Small things that could be put to use. Will found himself focusing on practicality, trying to convince himself that he wasn't on a mission to search for another belt for Hannibal to unravel with his eloquent chatter. He couldn't forget the excitement that had flickered in Hannibal's eyes.

The silence between them was less oppressive now, replaced by a quiet camaraderie. There was a subtle shift in the air, a tentative ease that softened the edges of their interactions. Will's sharp gaze flitted from one decaying corner to another, always aware of the fragility of their surroundings.

Hannibal, with his usual grace, moved through the dilapidated rooms with a measured pace, his eyes gleaming with a discerning curiosity.

A suitcase lay before Will, a relic of days gone by, its leather worn and cracked from years of neglect. With cautious hands, he flipped it open, revealing a cache of forgotten memories. Clothes, photographs, and trinkets held within its confines told a silent tale of lives lived in a world now consumed by desolation.

As Will rifled through the remnants of someone else's past, his eyes caught a glint of something small and inconspicuous. A book, its cover worn from the hands of its previous owner, nestled amidst the forgotten belongings. He withdrew the small volume and examined it with a furrowed brow.

Will bit his lip, contemplating the significance of the discovery. It struck him suddenly that Hannibal would appreciate such a find. The man had a penchant for the written word, a passion that transcended the bleak reality they found themselves in. Will imagined Hannibal's keen intellect delving into the pages, finding solace and distraction from the harshness of their existence.

A feeling akin to foolishness washed over Will as he clutched the small book in his hands. Why was he going out of his way to find something for Hannibal? They were two lone wanderers in a world that cared little for sentiment. Yet, the impulse remained, an inexplicable pull that defied logic.

His gaze darted around the room, making sure Hannibal hadn't taken notice of his discovery. Will hesitated, fingers tracing the edges of the book. It was a small act of kindness, a hidden offering in a world that had little room for such gestures.

The thought of Hannibal walking around his mind palace when boredom struck, spurred him into action. With a swift movement, he slipped the book under the top of his boot, securing it in a makeshift hiding spot. The leather of the boot pressed against the book.

Will's boots thudded against the creaky floorboards as he approached a side table, his eyes scanning the forgotten relics scattered upon it. In the midst of the abandoned debris, his gaze

caught a glimmer of familiarity—a deck of cards. The discovery ignited a spark of excitement in him, a feeling he couldn't suppress.

He seized the cards with a swift motion, his fingers adeptly shuffling the deck. A triumphant whoop escaped him, echoing through the quietude of the derelict room. Will's eyes gleamed.

Bounding over to Hannibal, the cards cradled in his hands, Will displayed his newfound treasures with a grin that stretched across his face like the sun setting over the prairie. "Look here, Hannibal," he exclaimed, his drawl thickening with enthusiasm. "Found me a deck of cards. Can't remember the last time I played a good game of War."

Hannibal's gaze met Will's, his raised eyebrow betraying an air of intrigue. Will, undeterred, continued with the fervor of a man unearthing a long-lost treasure. "I reckon it's high time I teach you the ropes. What do you say?"

A subtle smile curved Hannibal's lips, a silent acceptance of the impromptu proposal.

The fading light of the day streamed through the worn windows of the tiny, weathered church, casting a warm glow on the aged wooden pews. Will sat beside Hannibal, their shoulders brushing in the confined space. The soft creaks of the old building seemed to echo the history it held.

Will couldn't help but steal glances at Hannibal, whose features were bathed in the ethereal light. He looked like some kind of otherworldly being, and Will's cheeks flushed at the thought. A small, almost involuntary laugh escaped him, but the notion lingered – Lucifer was beautiful, after all.

Deciding to shift the atmosphere, Will retrieved the deck of cards from his pocket and spread them out between them on the pew. The brims of their hats bumped together, prompting another laugh from Will. With a sudden surge of boldness, he removed his hat and then carefully took Hannibal's as well.

Hannibal's silver and brown hair tumbled free, and Will grinned at the sight. "Well, look at you," he drawled, his Southern accent dancing through the words. "A gentleman without his hat."

Hannibal chuckled, a sound that seemed to harmonize with the fading sunlight. "I do believe you have started a revolution, Will."

Will shrugged playfully. "Just figured we could enjoy the game without our hats getting in the way. Besides, it's a rare sight to see you without it."

Hannibal ran his fingers through his hair, attempting to smooth down any rebellious strands. "Is that disappointment I detect in your tone?"

Will smirked. "Maybe a little. But, I reckon I like it better this way."

Will couldn't help but fidget with the deck of cards as Hannibal asked about the game of War. The soft shuffling of the worn cards filled the brief silence before Will launched into an explanation, his accent lending a musical quality to his words.

"Well, ya see, War is a simple game. We each get half the deck, and then we flip over the top card. The one with the highest card wins and takes both. If it's a tie, that's when the real fun starts. We each lay down three cards, and whoever's fourth card is the highest takes the whole pile."

Hannibal's eyes sparkled with curiosity as he listened intently. Will smiled, a tinge of sadness in his eyes, as he continued, "Used to play it all the time back in Louisiana. Good way to pass the time with friends or family."

Hannibal's voice, smooth and measured, resonated in the quiet church. "New memories, Will. That is what we are creating now."

As they delved into the game, round after round, Will couldn't help but marvel at how Hannibal consistently emerged victorious. Frustration crept into Will's tone as he accused, "You've played this before, haven't ya? Ain't no way you're winning every round by luck alone."

Hannibal's grin only widened. "I assure you, Will, I've never played War before. Perhaps it's just my strategic mind at work."

Will narrowed his eyes, a playful challenge in his gaze. "Strategic mind, huh? I'm callin' you a liar, stranger."

Hannibal chuckled, the sound blending with the soft rustle of cards. "You may call me what you wish, Will, but I assure you, my introduction to this game is fresh."

Will shook his head in mock disbelief. "Well, if you ain't cheatin', then you've got the luck of the devil himself."

Hannibal smiled wickedly. "Perhaps I just have a good eye for cards."

The darkness outside only heightened the glow from a lantern Will had found earlier. The small flames flickered, casting dancing shadows on the church walls. The worn cards were shuffled once more as Will couldn't contain his excitement.

"Alright, Hannibal, let's see if you've got any tricks left up your sleeve," Will declared, a mischievous glint in his eye.

Hannibal laughed, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "I am afraid I have run out of tricks, Will. The cards shall speak for themselves."

The first card was laid down, and the game resumed. The atmosphere inside the church shifted as the tension of competition mixed with the warmth of the lantern light. Will felt a surge of energy, a burst of joy he hadn't experienced in years.

As the game progressed, each flip of the card carried a weight of nostalgia for Will. He felt transported to a time before the world had fallen apart, a time when his worries were merely the troubles of a child. The laughter of friends and the carefree singing echoed in his mind, blending with the shuffling of the cards.

Then it happened – a victorious moment. Will's card triumphed over Hannibal's, and he couldn't contain his elation. He shot up from his seat, a triumphant cheer escaping his lips. "Ha! Take that, you snake. Victory is mine!"

Hannibal looked up at Will, and there it was, an expression that made Will's heart skip a beat – adoration. Hannibal's eyes sparkled with genuine delight. "Congratulations, Will. You have proven yourself a worthy opponent."

"Looks like Lady Luck decided to grace me tonight!" Will exclaimed, his laughter echoing in the empty church.

"I must admit, I let you win, Will. A small gift for your enthusiasm."

Will scoffed, teasingly. "A sore loser, you are. I won fair and square, Hannibal."

They cleared the cards, the lantern light casting a warm glow on the small space they occupied. Will shuffled the deck absentmindedly, nibbling on his lip. The air was charged with a newfound camaraderie, a shared laughter that echoed within the church walls.

"You still won most of the games, you crafty bastard," Will teased, the laughter bubbling out of him like a lively stream. "But I'll cherish this one win like it's the first rain after a drought."

The quiet of the church wrapped around them like a comforting blanket. Will's yawn echoed in the empty space, a testament to the weariness that lingered beneath his exterior. The silence, once an unwelcome companion, had transformed into a familiar friend, no longer burdened with the weight of awkwardness.

Will glanced at Hannibal, whose eyes held a sense of tranquility. He couldn't help but feel a warmth spread through his chest, a feeling that resonated beyond the immediate weariness. The complexities of their interactions had shifted, and the silence had become a shared space of understanding.

A thought crossed Will's mind, and he remembered the small book he had concealed in his boot. Pulling it out with a sly grin, he handed it to Hannibal. The sight of the book seemed to light up Hannibal's features, and Will couldn't deny the satisfaction that swelled within him.

"Found this for you," Will mumbled, trying to downplay the gesture, but the twinkle in his eyes betrayed a different sentiment.

Hannibal took the book with delicate reverence, his fingers tracing over its cover as if he held a precious artifact. Will pretended indifference, rolling his eyes playfully as if he hadn't just offered a piece of himself to Hannibal.

"You act like I handed you a golden ticket to paradise," Will teased, his Southern drawl thickening with amusement.

Hannibal's gaze met Will's, and there was a silent exchange between them, a shared understanding that transcended words. The small gesture spoke volumes, an unspoken acknowledgment of the connection they were forging amid the desolation of their world.

"You may not have given me paradise, Will," Hannibal replied, his voice carrying a soft sincerity, "but a good book is certainly a step in the right direction."

Will chuckled, a low and genuine sound that reverberated within the walls of the church.

Will's gaze lingered on the worn cover of the book as Hannibal ran his fingers over it, his touch gentle as if handling a delicate relic. "The Sorrows of Young Werther," Hannibal murmured, his words weaving through the quiet of the church. Will slid closer, curiosity piqued by the title alone.

"What's it about?" Will asked.

Hannibal's eyes, a shade of deep brown that seemed to hold the weight of countless stories, met Will's. There was a softness in his gaze, a desire to share the essence of the novel with Will. "It is a novel about a young man named Werther," Hannibal began, his voice a soothing cadence that invited Will into the narrative. "He finds himself entangled in a love triangle, torn between his emotions and reason."

Will's eyebrows furrowed as he processed Hannibal's words. The complexities of human emotions seemed to resonate in the narrative, echoing the tangled web of feelings that had woven itself around them. "So, what happens to this Werther fella?" Will inquired, a genuine interest coloring his tone.

Hannibal's lips curled into a thoughtful smile as he continued to caress the book. "His inability to let go of the woman he loves," Hannibal explained, "ultimately leads him to a tragic end of suicide. It is a tale of passion, conflict, and the consequences of succumbing to one's emotions."

Will hummed in response, the melancholy undertones of the story settling over the dimly lit church like a haunting melody. "Sounds like a mighty sad story," Will observed, the heaviness of the narrative seeping into his thoughts.

Hannibal nodded in agreement, a shared understanding passing between them. "Indeed, it is," he replied, his gaze lingering on the book, as if the words within held a profound significance beyond the pages.

Silence enveloped them momentarily, the weight of the narrative lingering in the air. Will leaned back against the pew, a contemplative expression on his face. "You think it's worth a read?" he asked, glancing at Hannibal.

Hannibal's eyes met Will's, a gleam of anticipation in their depths. "I believe every story has its merits," Hannibal replied, "and the beauty lies in how it resonates with the reader."

The echoes of silence settled as Will bit his lip, contemplating the request forming on the tip of his tongue. The dim light within the church flickered with uncertainty, dancing across the pages of the book cradled in Hannibal's hands.

With a measured exhale, Will finally voiced his desire, his Southern drawl weaving through the hallowed space. "Hannibal," he began, his voice a low murmur, "would you mind readin' some of that book to me?"

Hannibal's eyes glimmered with a soft glow of approval.

The worn pages of the book rustled as Hannibal delicately flipped to the beginning. Will watched with a curious anticipation, a mixture of anxiety and excitement churning within him. Hannibal's fingers traced the words on the page before finally settling on a passage. He looked up at Will, a small smile playing on his lips, before he began to read.

The words flowed from Hannibal's mouth, each syllable wrapped in the rich timbre of his voice. Will sat there, his eyes fixed on Hannibal, the church's dim light casting shadows on their faces. The tale of Werther unfolded, a narrative of passion and despair, and Will found himself drawn into the world painted by the words.

Hannibal's voice, like the soft strumming of a guitar under a moonlit sky, filled the silence of the church. Will chewed his cheeks, caught between the melancholy beauty of the story and the captivating sound of Hannibal's reading. He listened intently, the words becoming a melody that resonated within him.

There was a depth to Hannibal's voice that transcended the mere recitation of a story. It carried the weight of experience, a subtle cadence that spoke of the many chapters he had lived through. Will's eyes remained locked on Hannibal's face, absorbing not just the words but the emotions embedded in each sentence.

As the story unfolded, Hannibal's eyes met Will’s. Will felt a connection, a silent conversation weaving through the air. Hannibal's gaze held a vulnerability, a glimpse into the recesses of his soul that he rarely revealed.

The narrative of love, tragedy, and the inexorable pull of fate continued, and Will found himself entangled in the cadence of Hannibal's voice. He didn't interrupt, didn't inject his usual acerbic remarks. Instead, he let himself be enveloped by the warmth of Hannibal's presence and the haunting echoes of the tale.

The words hung in the air like a heavy mist, each syllable from Hannibal's lips weaving a spell that entwined with the dim-lit ambiance of the church. Will felt the weight of the narrative pressing against his chest, the poetic prose seeping into the crevices of his guarded heart. The story unfolded, a dance of passion and peril, and Will found himself caught in its inexorable current.

"She does not see, she does not feel that she is preparing a poison that will be the undoing of me and of her—and with a carnal delight, I gulp the cup she hands me for my destruction," Hannibal recited, his voice a velvety caress that sent shivers down Will's spine.

Will closed his eyes, surrendering to the intoxicating blend of Hannibal's voice and the tragic tale. The vulnerability he usually cloaked in layers of stoicism unraveled in the face of these shared words.

Unable to resist the magnetic pull of the narrative, Will felt himself leaning, his head finding solace on Hannibal's shoulder. The top of his curls brushed against Hannibal's cheek, a touch unguarded and unspoken. Will's heartbeat quickened, and he could feel the heat rising to his cheeks as if the Southern sun itself had ignited within him. He could feel Hannibal's stillness, the pause beneath him as if the world had halted its chaotic spin for this quiet interlude.

Hannibal's voice continued, the resonance vibrating through both the air and the space between them. Will fought against the urge to retreat, to regain the distance he had carefully maintained. But as Hannibal read, the words becoming a poignant soundtrack to the uncharted territories of their connection, Will found solace in the unexpected intimacy.

Hannibal paused for a moment, perhaps sensing the unspoken turmoil within Will. The older man's breath hitched imperceptibly, and then, he continued, seamlessly picking up the thread

of the narrative. Will listened, lost in the prose, in the intertwining of two lives through the art of storytelling.

As Hannibal's voice reached the final cadence, the church seemed to exhale, releasing the tension that had woven between them. Will lingered against Hannibal's shoulder, unable to muster the strength to pull away.

“Will.”

The whispered utterance of his name, barely audible in the hushed space between them, stirred something deep within Will. He looked up, finding himself dangerously close to Hannibal's face. Inches apart, Will could discern the faint scar on Hannibal's nose bridge, the elegant lines etched beside his eyes, and those eyes, those mesmerizing eyes that seemed to hold galaxies within.

Hannibal's hand ascended with the grace of a lover's touch. It hovered tenderly, and Will felt the warmth of that touch seep into the depths of his being. A single curl was gently tucked behind his ear. It was a gesture so soft, so achingly tender, that Will could almost believe he was a newborn lamb cradled in Hannibal's careful hands.

Their proximity became a canvas, the lines of Hannibal's face painted by the flickering light in the church. Hannibal's eyes, the color of forgotten constellations, held a depth that threatened to swallow Will whole. Hannibal’s whispered words, spoken with the reverence reserved for sacred confessions, echoed in the hollowed space.

In a voice that carried the weight of sincerity, Hannibal spoke, his words a delicate melody in the stillness. "How beautiful you are when you are happy, Will."

The admission hung in the air, a delicate revelation that wrapped around Will's heart, squeezing it gently. This act of tenderness, this kindness, it was an unfamiliar territory for the cowboy. He had faced danger, confronted threats, navigated the desolation of the world, but this—this he couldn't resist.

The walls Will had built around himself, the layers that shielded him from the vulnerability of emotions, began to crumble. The stoic cowboy was unraveling, giving in to a force he hadn't known existed within him. His hardened exterior melted like wax in the warmth of Hannibal's regard.

It was an admission Will couldn't accept or deny. The stars in Hannibal's eyes held a gravitational pull that tugged at the very core of his being. A sense of inevitability settled over Will, and he found himself slipping into the abyss of emotions, willingly succumbing to the enchantment of Hannibal's presence.

The air felt charged, heavy with unspoken sentiments. Will's chest tightened, not with fear, but with a yearning he couldn't quite articulate. He was lost in the vastness of Hannibal's gaze, drowning in the ocean of those bewitching eyes.

The stoic cowboy, once resolute and unyielding, now stood on the precipice of surrender. He didn't care about the consequences, about the unraveling of the layers that protected him from the chaos within. All that mattered was the fondness etched into the lines of Hannibal's face, the tenderness of his touch, and the undeniable truth that, in this moment, they existed outside the harsh realities of their world.

In the dimming light of the weathered church, Will's world narrowed to the space between him and Hannibal. Fists clenched in the fabric of Hannibal's shirt, he hauled the man closer, an act that drew an imperceptible gasp from Hannibal. The realization that Hannibal was equally affected sent a thrill through Will, a surge of exhilaration coursing through his veins.

Nuzzling against Hannibal's nose, Will muttered, his words mingling with the charged air, "You're damn infuriating." The statement, uttered in a tone that wavered between frustration and desire, hung in the space between them like a declaration. In that moment, nothing else mattered. Not the dangers lurking beyond the confines of the church, not the unforgiving desert wind that had left their lips parched.

Driven by an irresistible force, Will pulled Hannibal impossibly closer until their lips collided in a heated kiss. The touch was fervent, desperate, fueled by a desire that had been smoldering beneath the surface for longer than either cared to admit. Their lips, dry from the relentless desert wind, met with a raw intensity, the taste of each other's breath mingling in the shared space between them.

The whispering warnings in Will's mind, the echoes of danger and potential consequences, were drowned out by the visceral connection that enveloped them. In that stolen moment, within the dusty walls of the church, Will surrendered to the magnetic pull that drew him to Hannibal.

Time seemed to stretch and contract, caught in the vortex of their union. Hannibal's response, a blend of reciprocated need and restrained passion, mirrored Will's own fervor. The kiss, untamed and unbridled, spoke of a longing that transcended the desolation of their surroundings.

For a heartbeat, the world ceased to exist beyond the cocoon of their connection. Will reveled in the taste of Hannibal and the intoxicating realization that he had found something he never knew he sought.

Yet, beneath the surface of their burgeoning intimacy, the specter of danger lingered like a silent companion. The stoic cowboy within Will, though momentarily silenced, cast a wary glance toward the unknown path they had chosen. But in that stolen kiss, with Hannibal's warmth seeping into his very being, Will could not bring himself to care.

Hannibal pulled away from the kiss, leaving a trail of warmth between them. Will's chest rose and fell with the rhythm of shared breaths, his heart a complex tapestry of emotions stitched together by the thread of this unexpected connection.

The touch of Hannibal's gentle hands, the softness in his eyes, was a balm to the wounds Will didn't realize he carried. As if Hannibal possessed the skill of a master seamstress, he delicately wove together the fragments of Will's heart, creating something new, something unexplored. A part of Will feared this transformation, this uncharted territory he willingly ventured into, yet Hannibal was too beautiful to resist.

In the seconds between kisses, Will felt a kaleidoscope of sensations. It was as if his heart, broken and mended in the same breath, beat to the rhythm of Hannibal's touch.

Hannibal surged forward, his lips claiming Will's once again. Will, in turn, surrendered to the sensation, shuddering at the touch of Hannibal's tongue tracing the seam of his lips. It was an

exploration of intimacy, a dance between two souls that had found solace in each other's presence.

As they kissed, Hannibal's murmurs of admiration spilled forth in Italian, a language that Will didn't comprehend, yet the sentiment was conveyed through the cadence and the gentle timbre of Hannibal's voice. It was as if the words, foreign and unknown, wrapped around Will's heart, whispering promises and assurances.

"Non avere paura di me, amore mio," Hannibal murmured. "Do not be afraid of me."

Will, overcome by the intensity of the moment, found the courage to speak. "I'm not afraid of you, Hannibal," he confessed, the words escaping his lips with a sincerity that resonated through the shared space between them.

As Hannibal's lips traced over Will's cheeks, eyelids, and forehead, a cascade of whispered reassurances accompanied each kiss. "I know," Hannibal murmured.

Chapter End Notes

a little nervous about this chapter, I hope you guys liked it :3

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

cw - torture, interrogation, graphic violence (not between the mains)

this chapter ended up being 11k words so I had to cut it in half. (oops) the next part will be posted later today! :3

In the morning, as the first tendrils of daylight crept through the worn windows of the church, Will stirred on the floor. The rough surface beneath him was a stark contrast to the dreamlike haze that clung to his waking moments. He felt a gentle touch, fingers tracing the contours of his hair, and he groaned in response, still caught between the realms of sleep and consciousness.

"Quit it," he mumbled, swatting at the hands with a lazy motion, hoping to deter the persistent petting. However, the gentle caress persisted, and Will groaned again, his patience waning as he fought to keep his eyes closed against the intrusion.

When the petting continued, Will's eyes reluctantly fluttered open. The sight that greeted him made his heart skip a beat, and a flush of warmth crept up his neck to color his cheeks. There, leaning over him from the church pew, was Hannibal, his fingers still lightly tracing patterns on Will's hair.

Will blinked up at Hannibal, the soft glow of morning casting an ethereal light around the man. The prominent bridge of Hannibal's nose looked even more striking, and his sharp cheekbones were accentuated by the stray strands of hair that framed his face like spun gold. Will's gaze inadvertently dropped to Hannibal's lips, the memory of their shared kiss flooding his senses.

Those lips, Will thought, recalling the warmth and intimacy they had shared. The reality of the kiss struck him, and he couldn't help but marvel at the sheer audacity of it all. He felt like a lovesick fool, a sensation both foreign and exhilarating.

Hannibal's lips curved into a knowing smile as he continued to pet Will's hair, the gesture now more playful than soothing. "Good morning, Will," Hannibal greeted, his voice a low murmur that danced through the quiet of the church.

"Mornin'," Will muttered. Hannibal's fingers continued their gentle exploration through Will's hair, and the cowboy felt his breath quicken as Hannibal's touch moved to cup his cheek. The tenderness of the gesture left Will momentarily speechless, uncertain of how to navigate this uncharted territory.

Will cleared his throat, trying to dispel the strange mixture of emotions that swirled within him. Slowly, tentatively, he raised his own hand, gently placing it over Hannibal's. His voice, usually steady and composed, now sounded unexpectedly shy as he murmured, "I... I should check on the horses."

With that, Will shifted away from Hannibal, sitting up and searching for his hat. His fingers brushed against the worn brim, and he grinned. Instead of reaching for his own hat, he impulsively grabbed Hannibal's and plopped it onto his own head.

Standing up, Will stretched, a casual act that belied the whirlwind of thoughts in his mind. As Hannibal made a move to get up, Will gently scratched his own head.

"Stay there for a bit, get some more shut-eye," Will suggested, a soft smile playing on his lips. Hannibal nodded, a hint of amusement in his eyes. "Tired of me already?" he quipped.

Will couldn't help but chuckle at the remark, but as he observed Hannibal's eyes, he saw more than jest in them. A flicker of worry, perhaps a touch of panic, and something deeper – possessiveness. The colors in Hannibal's eyes seemed to shift, resembling a blend of green and amber in the morning light. It was beautiful.

Will grinned as he watched Hannibal stretch on the pew, resembling a cat luxuriating in the morning sun. Shaking his head in response to Hannibal's question, Will teased, "Nah, I'm not runnin'. Couldn't even if I wanted to. Not now that I finally find you interestin'."

As he reached down to run his fingers through Hannibal's hair, a small smirk played on Will's lips. "I'll be back," he promised.

Hannibal, still reclining on the pew, looked up at Will with a mischievous glint in his eyes. "You look quite handsome in my hat," he remarked, his words stirring a subtle warmth in Will's cheeks.

Rolling his eyes, Will retorted, "Quit it, Hannibal. The horses are gonna run off if you keep distractin' me."

Hannibal's smile widened, a feline satisfaction evident in his gaze. "If you are being distracted, then my plan is working," he remarked, his tone playful.

Scoffing, Will shot back, "Quit with the mind games."

Will stepped out into the morning sunlight, the land stretching before him as far as the eye could see. The horses greeted him with gentle neighs. Running his hand through the coarse hair of his trusted steed, Will found solace in the rhythmic movement of his fingers through the mane. The night's memories lingered in his mind, emotions bubbling beneath the surface like a hidden current.

As he tended to the horses, Will's thoughts wandered back to the warmth of the lantern-lit church, to the shared laughter and the intimate moments with Hannibal. A surge of feelings, long buried in the recesses of his heart, had risen like a dormant river. He couldn't name this emotion, but it coursed through him like lifeblood, making him feel more alive than he had in years.

Alive. The word echoed in Will's mind, a mantra that encapsulated the unfamiliar sensation blooming within him. It was a raw, untamed emotion, defying the stoicism he had built over the years. He frowned, chewing on his lip, grappling with the unfamiliarity of it all.

With a deep breath, Will re-entered the church, his boots thudding softly against the weathered floor. His gaze found Hannibal, who was studying Will's cowboy hat with a tilted

head. A smile graced Hannibal's lips as he delicately placed the hat atop his own head, the gesture imbued with a sense of playfulness.

Will hummed in acknowledgment, glancing around the weathered interior of the church. The soft glow of sunlight filtering through the windows played over the worn pews and dust particles suspended in the air. The atmosphere was oddly serene, considering the desolation of the world outside.

"What's got you smiling?" Will asked, genuine curiosity in his tone.

Hannibal's gaze swept over the church, his smile lingering. "The irony of it all," he began, his voice a measured cadence. "One would expect a place like this to be somber, filled with the echoes of despair. Yet, here we are, finding solace in its quiet decay."

Will nodded. "Seems God's forsaken this place," he remarked, his Southern drawl coloring the words.

Hannibal turned to face Will, his eyes alight with a faint mischief. "Perhaps God has, indeed. He is a fickle deity, isn't he?"

Will chuckled, a low and raspy sound that resonated in the empty church. "Don't reckon He's been keepin' up with his responsibilities lately."

Hannibal's gaze softened, his eyes reflecting the sunlight filtering through the dust-laden air. "Defying God's rules seems much preferable in these times," he mused.

Will smirked. "Ain't much point in followin' 'em now. The world's gone to hell."

Hannibal's grin mirrored Will's sentiment. "Indeed, and I believe he might enjoy the chaos as much as we do."

Will snorted, the sound carrying a mix of amusement and bitterness. "I reckon you'd love it if this roof just collapsed mid-Mass. Packed pews, choir singing – you'd just love it, wouldn't you?"

A wicked glint danced in Hannibal's eyes as he agreed, "You are quite correct, Will. The dramatic demise of a sacred gathering, orchestrated by a higher power, would be a spectacle to behold."

Will couldn't help but roll his eyes at the sheer delight on Hannibal's face. "You're somethin' else."

Hannibal sauntered over to the pew again, a cloud of dust rising as he blew it off his book. The joy on his face was unmistakable, and Will couldn't suppress the curling of his own lips at the sight.

"Well," Hannibal said, turning back to Will with the book in hand, "we cannot let the end of the world take away our appreciation for the finer things."

Will scoffed, feigning indifference. "Fine things, huh? That book looks like it's been through a dust storm and back."

Hannibal smiled, cradling the worn book with a reverence that bordered on affection. "It has weathered the storms, much like us, and yet it still holds stories waiting to be discovered."

Will shook his head, a smirk playing on his lips. "You and your damn metaphors. Just read the damn thing, will ya?"

Hannibal's eyes met Will's. "Patience, Will. Good things come to those who wait."

Will and Hannibal walked towards the waiting horses. The previous night's stolen kisses lingered in the air like a secret promise, leaving Will feeling both exhilarated and uncertain.

He couldn't shake the question echoing in his mind – how were they going to act now, and would this change everything between them?

Will mounted his horse, a silent tension clinging to the desert breeze. His eyes never left Hannibal, who gracefully approached with a small book in hand. Will furrowed his brow, watching Hannibal slip the book into one of the bags on his horse. Panic fluttered in Will's chest – what did this mean? Would they go back to being distant travelers, or was there something more?

As Hannibal looked up at Will through the brim of his hat, a strangely coquettish expression played on his face. Will gulped, uncertainty knotting his stomach. He found himself yearning for the simplicity of their connection, for the stolen moments that had shattered the walls between them. But now, faced with the reality of daylight, Will wasn't sure how to navigate this.

Hannibal's eyes held a glint of mischief, and Will's internal struggle was written on his face. He bit his lip, grappling with the swirling emotions threatening to consume him. Did he dare to hope for more, or was last night destined to be a singular occurrence? The desire to kiss Hannibal again, to feel the warmth of those lips, tugged at him like a relentless current. But fear held him back – fear of overstepping, fear of misreading the signals.

Before Will could decide, Hannibal reached up, pulling him down by the shirt sleeve. Will's breath caught as Hannibal removed his hat and stood on tiptoes to press a chaste kiss to his lips. The sensation was both electrifying and grounding, like a tether to a world that defied explanation. Will's heart exploded into a whirlwind of emotions, leaving him breathless.

A grin spread across Will's face, a reflection of the joy that bubbled within him. He chased Hannibal's lips as they pulled away, the lingering taste of the kiss still fresh. Hannibal smirked knowingly, his gaze dancing with a playful spark. Will's face heated, and he cursed under his breath, attempting to regain control over his unruly emotions.

"Wipe that damn smirk off your face," Will muttered, though the command was laced with an underlying humor he couldn't conceal.

Hannibal pouted, feigning innocence. "Do you hate my smile that much, Will?"

Will scoffed, a wry grin playing on his lips. "You know damn well I don't.”

Will and Hannibal strolled together, the tethered reins of their horses in hand. Overhead, rain clouds gathered, promising relief from the oppressive heat that hung in the air. Will's heart pounded in his chest, a sensation that seemed to match the gathering storm.

He felt hyper-aware of himself, the grit of dust clinging to his skin and the itchiness of his clothes. The thought of rain danced in his mind like a distant dream. Will had never cared much about his appearance, having lived a solitary life where no one was there to look at him. Now, with Hannibal by his side, he wished desperately for the rain to cleanse the dirt from his face and hair.

Glancing up, Will found Hannibal already looking at him. Heat crept into his cheeks, and he quickly averted his gaze, cursing himself for the uncharacteristic embarrassment. He needed to get a grip, he scolded himself.

As they continued their stroll, a slight prickling sensation crept up the back of Will's neck. A feeling that they were being trailed, followed by unseen eyes from some distant point. He swiveled his gaze around, scanning the vastness behind them. Perhaps it was just his usual paranoia, an old companion that never seemed to leave him.

Will bit his lip and yearned for Hannibal to talk, to distract him from the chaos within. The man had always been good at distracting him, and Will scoffed at the realization. Arrogant bastard, he thought, though a fond smile tugged at the corners of his lips.

He opened his mouth to speak, words lingering on the tip of his tongue, but hesitated. Before he could voice his thoughts, Hannibal caught the hesitation and smirked, a glint of amusement in his eyes. "Is something on your mind, Will?" he inquired, his voice smooth as ever.

Will shook his head, a sheepish grin playing on his lips. "Just wonderin' what you liked before all this mess," he admitted, the words escaping with a hint of vulnerability.

Hannibal's smile deepened, a glint of nostalgia in his eyes. "I was a connoisseur of the arts," he began. "Paintings, especially. I found beauty in the strokes of a brush, the play of colors on canvas."

Will raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Art, huh?" he mused.

Hannibal nodded. "Indeed. But most of all, I loved music."

"Music?" Will echoed, genuine curiosity in his voice.

"Yes, the harpsichord, to be precise. I played it," Hannibal revealed, a subtle pride in his admission.

Will grinned, the mental image of Hannibal playing the instrument amusing him. "I can picture you all prim and proper playin' the harpsichord," he teased.

Hannibal chuckled, the sound a rich resonance in the desert air. "I assure you, I had my moments of refinement. However, I also enjoyed the raw energy of an orchestra."

"Orchestra?" Will's eyes widened. "Never been to one. What's it like?"

Hannibal tilted his head in contemplation before offering an elaborate description. "Picture this, Will. A stage filled with musicians, each lost in the dance of their own instrument. The violin, the strings vibrating with the soulful melody, the crescendo of emotions echoing through the hall."

As Hannibal spoke, Will found himself captivated by the vivid imagery. He closed his eyes, allowing Hannibal's words to paint a canvas of sound within his mind. The resonance of the

violin, the harmony of the strings—Will sighed, the ethereal quality of the description almost transporting him to a different realm.

Opening his eyes, he found Hannibal studying him with a knowing grin. "Sounds beautiful," Will murmured, a wistful smile playing on his lips.

Hannibal's gaze lingered. "Indeed, it is, Will.

As they continued to walk, the fingers of their free hands brushed together, sending a shiver down Will's spine. He hesitated before speaking again, the admission reluctant. "I used to play guitar as a kid. Never got much good at it. Singing, though... I was good at that. Haven't done it in years, though."

Hannibal's fingers brushed against Will's again, the touch gentle yet deliberate. "You must sing for me one day," he suggested, a glint of challenge in his eyes.

Will scowled, narrowing his eyes. "Not a chance in hell."

Hannibal's laughter echoed in the air, the sound carrying a warmth that felt like a brief respite from the impending storm. "We will see about that, Will. Perhaps the rain will coax a melody out of you yet."

The clouds hung low and heavy, a dark shroud signaling the imminent arrival of rain. Will and Hannibal led their horses into another silent town, its stillness only interrupted by the distant rumble of thunder. They tethered their horses to a post and prepared to explore the eerie quietude that seemed to pervade every corner.

The prickling sensation crawled up the back of Will's neck again, a familiar feeling that made him squint into the distance. He scanned the surroundings, suspicion etched across his features. If Hannibal noticed anything amiss, he made no indication, his silence amplifying

Will's sense of unease. Maybe, Will thought, he was just letting his paranoia run wild again. If Hannibal saw no cause for concern, then perhaps there was none. Will cursed under his breath and adjusted his hat, pulling it lower over his eyes.

The two men wandered through the desolate town, its streets echoing with their footsteps. They approached a weathered building that served as the local jail. The floorboards creaked beneath their weight as they stepped inside, the interior dimly lit by the fading daylight filtering through the barred windows.

Hannibal remained unusually silent, and the lack of conversation put Will on edge. He shot a sidelong glance at the man, finding him absorbed in studying the faded wanted posters that adorned the jail walls. Will furrowed his brow and joined Hannibal in examining the ink-stained scraps of paper.

The posters depicted faces that time had rendered almost indistinguishable, their crimes reduced to mere remnants of a bygone era. Will squinted at one that mentioned "Train robbers," his lips curling into a smirk. "Bet those bastards are long dead by now," he mumbled, half to himself.

Hannibal, his gaze lingering on the tattered posters, nodded in agreement. "Indeed, Will. Time has a way of reclaiming what once belonged to it."

The floorboards groaned beneath their footsteps as they moved toward the lone desk in the jail. Hannibal's silence was palpable, and Will couldn't shake the feeling that the man's mind was occupied with thoughts that he chose not to share.

The rain intensified outside as Will and Hannibal turned away from the wanted posters and made their way to a weathered desk. The atmosphere crackled with tension, the rhythmic drumming of rain on the roof punctuating the silence between them. Hannibal's keen eyes spotted a sheriff's pin on the desk, and a smirk played on his lips as he picked it up.

He stepped closer to Will, and the Southern cowboy's breath caught in his throat. Hannibal's long, elegant fingers pinned the sheriff's insignia to Will's shirt, and the weight of that gesture felt like a declaration. Will moved closer, lips brushing against Hannibal's, a shudder coursing through him.

Hannibal flicked his eyes behind them, a subtle signal that set Will on edge. He sensed a presence, an unsettling awareness that confirmed his earlier suspicion of being followed. Swiftly, Will grabbed his colt, turning just in time for a man to collide with the head of his gun. He cocked the colt, his glare piercing the stranger.

Without looking at Hannibal, Will spoke through gritted teeth, "Did you know about this, Hannibal?"

Hannibal's response was immediate, "Yes."

Will clenched his free hand, frustration bubbling within him. "And you didn't say a damn word?" He could practically feel Hannibal tilting his head, the infuriating nonchalance of the man.

"I was curious," Hannibal replied, his voice a low murmur that only fueled Will's anger.

Will scowled, his Southern drawl thickening with irritation. "You forgot how much you irritate me, didn't you?" He couldn't help but wonder if Hannibal's curiosity was worth the potential danger they now faced.

Hannibal's gaze held a glint of amusement, and he spoke with a velvety tone, "I cannot help but wonder, Will, how you plan to punish me for this oversight."

Will wished he could turn and glare daggers into Hannibal's face, but the immediate threat took precedence. "We'll deal with that later, Hannibal. Right now, we've got ourselves another problem."

The tension in the room hung thick as Will pressed the cold steel of his colt against the man's face, studying him with narrowed eyes. Blonde hair tousled and green eyes defiant, the man bore the mark of a life lived on the edge. A missing eye told a story of battles fought and survived. His clothes were well-kept, a stark contrast to Will's worn attire.

"Sit," Will commanded, his voice carrying the weight of authority. The man complied, lowering himself into a wooden chair, the creaking protesting the sudden intrusion. Will kept his gun trained on him, eyes never wavering.

"Start talkin', or I'll shoot out the other good eye you got," Will growled, his jaw set in determination. The man sneered up at him, a twisted grin that hinted at defiance.

"How long you been followin' us?" Will demanded, the urgency in his voice cutting through the silence. The man, undeterred, replied, "Couple days."

"Why the hell you trailin' us?" Will's patience wore thin, and he couldn't fathom why someone would be on their tail. The man's response sent a surge of inexplicable rage through Will.

"Lookin' for your tall friend over there," the man said with a sly grin, a statement that hit Will like a punch to the gut. The mere thought of someone hunting Hannibal ignited a primal anger within him.

"What the hell you want with him?" Will's voice was low, an ominous growl that mirrored the storm outside. The man stayed silent, provoking Will further. He gritted his teeth, suppressing the rising fury.

Hannibal circled the man like a predator, his movements fluid and deliberate, reminiscent of a big cat stalking its prey. Will's eyes followed Hannibal's every move, a furrow forming on his brow as he questioned Hannibal's intentions. In Hannibal's hands, there were ropes, and Will's suspicion deepened.

"What in the hell are you doing, Hannibal?" Will demanded, his tone tinged with both curiosity and concern. Hannibal's response was a wicked smile, a hint of mischief playing in the corners of his maroon eyes. "Indulge me, Will," Hannibal purred, his voice carrying a dangerous allure that sent shivers down Will's spine.

Swallowing hard, Will watched as Hannibal skillfully tied the man to the chair. The stranger repeated his vow of silence, stubbornness etched across his face. Will scowled, frustration mounting. "We should just kill him now," Will suggested, the urgency of their situation pressing on him. "More of his kind could be on their way."

Hannibal, however, shook his head, a disapproving glint in his eyes. "That would be a waste of opportunity," he countered, his voice calm and measured. Will, growing impatient, demanded to know what opportunity they were squandering. Hannibal looked up at him from behind the restrained man, ropes in hand, and a devilish smile playing on his lips.

"He has hunted us, followed us without our knowledge," Hannibal explained, his gaze piercing through Will. "Should he not be punished for that?" Will sighed, realizing the truth in Hannibal's words. "We don't know a damn thing about him because he refuses to speak," Will argued, his frustration still evident. Hannibal tilted his head, looking up at Will through his lashes, a hypnotic gaze that made Will gulp.

"Should he not suffer, Will?" Hannibal asked, his question hanging in the air. "Don't you want to make him speak?" Will bit his lip, torn between the urgency of their situation and the need for answers. The man's stubborn silence grated on him, and the prospect of unraveling the mystery compelled Will to reluctantly agree with Hannibal's unconventional methods. This was a damn waste of time, but as Hannibal had pointed out, they knew nothing about the man, and Will needed to know more.

Will cursed under his breath, a low sound that echoed the tension in the room. He nodded jerkily at Hannibal's suggestion to make the man talk. The captive fought desperately against his restraints, his struggles accompanied by a cacophony of curses. Hannibal, ever the composed predator, tutted disapprovingly. "It is rude to interrupt," he chided, casting a glance towards Will, who reluctantly lowered his gun.

As Hannibal approached, his eyes never leaving the writhing man, a request for Will's knife hung in the air. Will scowled but complied. "Thank you," Hannibal said, his fingers wrapping around the hilt of the knife with a practiced ease. The air thickened with anticipation as Hannibal walked closer to their captive, movements deliberate, a dance that held the promise of both pain and revelation.

The blade traced lightly across the man’s throat, a threat that danced on the edge of drawing blood. The man, defiant and unyielding, laughed in the face of the impending danger,

spewing curses like a man possessed. Hannibal, his expression a blank canvas of calculated indifference, responded with a swift and brutal move. The knife plunged into the man’s hand, the sound of steel meeting bone punctuating the tense atmosphere. Will's breath caught in his throat, his gaze fixed on the scene unfolding before him.

Hannibal's hands reached for the man's hair. "Your name," Hannibal demanded. The man’s sobs turned into a stuttered admission, "C-clive."

Hannibal's smile, a macabre expression of satisfaction, sent shivers down Will's spine. Clive, his defiance momentarily shattered, stared wide-eyed at the blood oozing from his hand, pain etched across his face.

Hannibal shushed the man's screams with a gentleness that contrasted sharply with the violence he'd just unleashed. Circling around the captive again, Hannibal spoke dreamily, his voice a hypnotic cadence that seemed to extract truth from the shadows. "You have been following us for days, Clive," Hannibal stated, his words weaving through the air like tendrils of smoke. "Surely, you have more to say."

Clive, breathing heavily, tried to muster the remnants of his bravado. "Go to hell," he spat out, defiance returning to his gaze as he met Hannibal's maroon eyes. Hannibal raised an eyebrow, an almost amused glint in his eyes. "Such a clichéd retort," he mused, circling the bound man once more.

Will’s grip tightened on his colt, torn between the impulse to put an end to this interrogation and the unsettling curiosity that gnawed at his insides. The room felt charged with an impending storm.

Will's head spun, the room closing in around him as he observed Hannibal's interrogation. The vibrations from his lower body sent tremors through him, an unexpected and disorienting reaction to the scene playing out before his eyes. He felt like a moth drawn to the flame, unable to tear his gaze away from the sinister sight orchestrated by Hannibal.

“Will.”

Hannibal's voice, a serpent's hiss, slithered through the air, weaving a spell that made Will's knees threaten to buckle. He approached, unable to resist the magnetic pull of Hannibal's command. The knife, now slick with Clive's blood, exchanged hands between Hannibal and Will. Hannibal's words, a whispered suggestion, danced in the air, making the fine hairs on the back of Will's neck stand on end.

"He doesn't seem eager to chat, does he?" Hannibal remarked, the corner of his lips quirking into a predatory smile. Will, caught in the undertow of Hannibal's presence, could only nod in response. The knife felt heavier in his hand, a tangible connection to the dark path they were traversing.

"Shall we cut his nails off for every question he evades?" Hannibal's question hung in the air, the implication of impending brutality settling like a storm cloud over the room. Will shivered at the suggestion, the nervous energy between them palpable. He nodded, his voice catching in his throat. "Ten questions, then," he stammered, attempting to infuse levity into the grim proceedings.

Hannibal's smile deepened, a gleam of satisfaction in his eyes. "Choose wisely, Will," he murmured, the words carrying a weight that went beyond the immediate situation.

Will closed in on Clive, Hannibal's subtle guidance urging him forward. Gripping the knife with a tenacity that matched the fierce determination in his eyes, Will's gaze bore into the disheveled man before him. Clive, a slobbering mess, squirmed under the weight of Will's scrutiny, yet defiance flickered in his eyes.

Standing tall over men like Clive had always made Will feel powerful, a potent reminder of his resilience in a world that constantly underestimated him. Men who believed they were better, who believed they could end him – Will had faced them before, and he would face them again. This time, however, the stakes were higher, and Will needed information.

"Who sent you?" Will demanded, his voice a low growl that cut through the room. Clive's response was a string of curses, a futile attempt to intimidate. Will fought the urge to roll his eyes; he had dealt with better men than Clive. Raising his knife, Will pressed forward with a grim determination.

Will repeated his question, the anticipation palpable. Clive, defiant to the end, spat venomous words at Will. "I'll fuckin' kill you," he snarled, his eyes ablaze with a twisted sense of pride. Will's jaw clenched, his patience wearing thin. He wasn't here for idle threats; he was here for answers.

In one swift motion, Will took the knife, shuddering inwardly as he slid the top of the blade beneath Clive's nail. The scream that tore from Clive's throat echoed in the room, a cacophony of pain and desperation. Will's expression remained stoic, a mask he wore to conceal the unease beneath the surface.

"Now, who sent you?" Will repeated, the words a steely command.

The action sent a jolt of power coursing through Will's veins, an intoxicating sensation that mingled with the heady rush of adrenaline. This was uncharted territory for him, a realm of brutality he had never ventured into before. Will's gaze remained fixed on Clive, who gritted his teeth against the pain, stammering out a name – Luther.

Will's eyes flicked up to Hannibal, seeking confirmation in the recognition mirrored in the man's dark gaze. Luther wasn't a stranger to Hannibal, and that revelation set the stage for a confrontation neither of them had anticipated.

"Know that son of a bitch?" Will spat out the words, his southern accent thickening with a mix of anger and curiosity. Hannibal nodded, a subtle acknowledgment that fueled the fire within Will.

With Luther's name hanging in the air like a dark cloud, Will pressed on. "Who the hell is Luther?" he demanded, his impatience evident. Hannibal responded with a sly smile. "Nine questions left," he teased, the corners of his lips curling upward.

A glare from Will was Hannibal's reward. "Damn it, Hannibal," Will muttered, frustration evident in his voice.

Clive's writhing form and the agony etched across his face seemed to fuel a primal urge within Will. Will, caught between the desire to end it all and the grim fascination of wielding

power, pressed on.

"What does Luther want with Hannibal?" Will demanded, his voice a low growl. Clive's stubborn silence earned him another grimace from Will. The blade slipped beneath another nail, and Will peeled it away. The sight of red flesh, twitching and bleeding, sent Will's heart into a frenetic rhythm.

Clive heaved and spat, his raspy voice breaking the strained silence. "You're walkin' with the devil, cowboy. Luther wants justice for the men Hannibal slaughtered. Cold-blooded murders, they were. Tore out their throats like damn walkers."

"He had good reason," Will asserted, his voice a defiant retort. Clive's head shook in disbelief, his eyes wide with a mixture of fear and conviction.

"He's a mad son of a bitch," Clive insisted, his words dripping with disdain. Will snapped, commanding Clive to watch his mouth.

Will's frustration and internal conflict clashed with the confusing waves of desire that Hannibal's proximity ignited within him. The room felt like a pressure cooker of emotions, the sharp scent of blood intermingling with the intoxicating allure of Hannibal's whispered words.

"This is stupid," Will muttered, clenching his fists in an attempt to regain control over the situation. Hannibal disagreed, his head shaking as he approached Will. Behind him, Hannibal enveloped Will in his arms, a gesture that sent shivers down Will's spine. The warmth of Hannibal's body pressed against him, the hand over Will's gripping the knife, guiding it with deliberate intent.

As Hannibal's breath caressed Will's throat, a tumultuous whirlwind of emotions stirred within him. Desire, undeniable and unspoken, pulsed through Will's veins. Hannibal's voice, a seductive murmur in his ear, heightened the intensity of the moment. The words painted a twisted picture of power, control, and the undeniable thrill of manipulating a life hanging by a thread.

"Can't you see, Will?" Hannibal whispered, his tone weaving a spell around them. "Clive is suffering, and you hold his fate in your hands. You feel the power, the control. His life rests at your feet, and we are playing with it, toying with it like a cat with a ball of yarn."

Will's response was a breathless admission, "Like God." Hannibal's smile, a wicked acknowledgment of their shared understanding, confirmed the sentiment. "Yes," Hannibal agreed, his voice a velvet caress against Will's ear. Desire, desire, desire – a mantra echoing in the recesses of his mind.

Will's eyes fixated on the oozing blood from Clive's injured hand, his own fascination mingling with an unsettling sense of exhilaration. It was a revelation, a glimpse into the darker corners of his psyche that he never dared to explore. The notion of having fun in this twisted dance with cruelty sent vibrations down his spine, a recognition of his own descent into something he couldn't comprehend.

Hannibal's hand, a serpentine presence, coiled further around Will's, holding the knife. Over Will's shoulder, Hannibal addressed Clive with a calm detachment that belied the intensity of the situation.

"Clive," Hannibal purred, his voice carrying the weight of judgment. "Your men stole something from me. Stealing, as you might agree, is quite rude."

Clive's lips curled into a snarl, a visceral display of anger and frustration. "You're both fuckin' crazy," he spat out, his words laced with venom. "Think you can just play God with people's lives, huh? You're both sick, twisted sons of bitches."

Will couldn't help but smirk, a dark amusement bubbling within him. He wondered if Clive could see the madness reflected in his own eyes. "Well, Clive, ain't that the pot callin' the kettle black?"

"I'll cut your fuckin' throats, just like he did!" Clive screamed, his voice echoing through the room.

"Tut, tut, Clive," Hannibal chided, a portrait of elegance amidst the brutality. "Threats of violence only serve to diminish the eloquence of our conversation."

"Tell me who Luther is." Will growled, his Southern drawl cutting through the stifling air. He could feel the tension in the room, the palpable fear that danced in Clive's eyes. Yet, defiance held strong, as if Clive clung to the shreds of his pride.

Clive remained stubbornly silent, the lines of pain etched across his face. Will's jaw tightened as Hannibal guided their hands down, the knife poised to pierce Clive's forearm. The scream that tore through the room reverberated in Will's ears, but he didn't flinch. The blood oozed from the fresh wound, staining the already blood-stained floor.

Hannibal uncurled his hand from Will's, his maroon eyes fixed on Clive with a predatory glint. "Answer him, Clive," Hannibal purred, the serpentine quality of his voice weaving through the tortured symphony. "He asked you a question."

Clive's breath hitched between sobs, his eyes darting between Will and Hannibal. "I-I ain't tellin' you nothin'. Luther'll gut me if I do," Clive stammered, his defiance waning in the face of the relentless pain.

Will's grip on the knife tightened, a mixture of frustration and determination coursing through him. "Well, ain't that a damn shame," he muttered, a harsh edge to his voice. "But you see, Clive, we're runnin' outta patience. And patience is the only thing standin' between you and losin' that eye of yours."

Hannibal's smirk widened, a sinister satisfaction playing on his lips. "Indeed, Clive. You might find an eye for an eye is not just a saying," he mused, his gaze unwavering.

"Please, please don't take my damn eye!" Clive's voice cracked with desperation, his eyes wide and terror-stricken.

Will's voice, sharp and demanding, cut through Clive's turmoil. "Who is Luther, and what the hell does he want with Hannibal?"

Clive, struggling to compose himself, sputtered out the truth between gasps for breath. "Luther's the leader, runs the whole damn group in Deadwood. He... promised my family a house if I brought Hannibal back alive. Said it'd be easy." The admission was punctuated by a surge of uncontrollable sobs, his tears mingling with the blood that stained his skin.

Will's jaw clenched as he processed the information. "What the hell do they want with Hannibal?" Will demanded, his eyes narrowing. Clive, struggling to meet Will's gaze, took a shaky breath before revealing the truth. "We've been low on s-supply. They... they wanna eat him."

The room seemed to warp around Will as he confronted the gruesome image that danced in his mind – Hannibal's lifeless body, torn and ravaged by those unworthy of the feast. The anger, a volatile force, surged through him like a storm, his thoughts rattling like a venomous snake ready to strike.

Enough of this. The pretense, the game, everything. Will felt something clawing beneath his skin, a primal force urging him to end the madness. The knife, stained with Clive's blood, felt like an extension of his anger. Will's eyes hardened, and in a swift, visceral motion, he withdrew the blade from Clive's arm and thrust it into the man's good eye.

A guttural scream pierced the air, a symphony of agony echoing through the room. Will twisted the blade, his face a mask of determination, until the screams silenced into a grotesque hush. The room was still, save for the sputtering breaths of the dying man.

Will's chest heaved, the aftermath of his violent act sending shockwaves through his senses. The rush of power, the elation, it overwhelmed him. He stared at the lifeless form of Clive, the man who had become a conduit for Will's unraveling sanity.

Blood adorned Will like a gruesome crown, and yet, in the midst of the macabre scene, Hannibal looked at him with an expression that transcended shock – admiration, pride, and something akin to arousal danced in the maroon depths of Hannibal's eyes.

As blood dripped across Will's face, he felt a madness engulfing him. His own actions surprised him, the boundaries between predator and prey blurred in the shadows of the room.

Will's gaze met Hannibal's, the silent understanding between them creating an electric current in the air.

Will ripped his hat off and threw it to the ground as he stormed out.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

hi guys , sorry for the delay! canadian weather has my power going out like crazy :(anyway, here’s part two! peek at the updated tags hehe

The rain came down in torrents, a cleansing deluge that mirrored the tempest within Will's own being. He stumbled out into the storm, the echo of his own violent actions reverberating through his core. Nausea clawed at his insides, threatening to erupt. Will cursed under his breath, his chest tight with conflicting emotions.

As the raindrops collided with his face, Will closed his eyes, seeking solace in the cool embrace of the downpour. The blood that had painted him began to wash away, diluted and carried by the relentless rain. Will felt the weight of his own madness, yet beneath it, an inexplicable sense of exhilaration surged through him.

The world seemed to vibrate around him, and Will shuddered. A sickening awareness of the perverse pleasure he found in the act gnawed at his conscience. Violence wasn't meant to be enjoyable, yet here he stood, buzzing with energy, alive in the most twisted sense.

As Will turned, he saw Hannibal emerging, dragging Clive's lifeless form into the rain-soaked night. The raindrops clung to Hannibal's form, accentuating the sinuous lines of his body. Muscles rippled beneath the fabric of his shirt, a testament to the effortless strength with which he disposed of the consequences of their actions.

In the midst of the storm, Hannibal looked feral, untamed by the conventions of humanity. A strange kind of beauty emanated from him, a primal allure that transcended the boundaries of morality. Will's gaze lingered, torn between revulsion and a disturbing fascination with the man who seemed to revel in the chaos they had unleashed.

The rain beat down relentlessly, a cacophony that matched the storm brewing within Will. His patience, already stretched thin, finally snapped. He rounded on Hannibal, eyes aflame, and the accusation burst from him.

"You son of a bitch!" Will's voice cut through the rain, a raw scream. "We're being hunted because you can't resist playin’ with your damn food!"

Hannibal dropped Clive's lifeless form with a nonchalant elegance, his demeanor unchanged despite the accusation. "One man hardly constitutes being hunted," he countered, his voice smooth, unruffled.

Will's scowl deepened, and he spat out his frustration over the drumming rain. "They'll send more, Hannibal. They always do."

Hannibal, ever composed, tilted his head. "And we will kill those men too."

The casualness of Hannibal's response incited Will's wrath. "Luther is determined, but he is not smart," Hannibal continued. "We can outwit him."

"I don't give a damn about Luther's intelligence!" Will cursed, running a hand over his face. "I used to be smart. I used to live day to day without stupid fuckin' problems like being hunted by a group of damn cannibals."

His frustration took aim at Hannibal, blaming him for the chaos that now surrounded them. "Damn you, Hannibal! Damn you for makin’ me feel like I'm running from somethin’!"

The rain continued its relentless dance around them as Will's frustration morphed into a torrent of emotions. He looked at Hannibal with eyes clouded by the storm inside him and said, "I used to live fine. Alone. With order. I didn't feel so damn much."

Hannibal, wet and unruffled, approached him with a predatory grace. "But it wasn't really living, was it?" he questioned, his voice carrying a haunting melody. He lifted a hand, placing it gently over Will's heart. "Do you feel alive now?"

The intensity of Hannibal's gaze held Will captive, a magnetic force drawing them closer. Will felt a rising tide of conflicting emotions within him. Fear, desire, confusion. Yet, as Hannibal's hand rested over his heart, something ignited. The spark of life, of chaos, and Will couldn't deny it.

Without a word, Will seized Hannibal by the neck, urgency coursing through his veins. Their lips met in a fierce, desperate kiss. It was a moment of raw passion, a collision of energies that left them both breathless.

As they separated, Will's chest heaving, the energy that had been coiling within him demanded an outlet. He pointed at Clive, lying lifeless in the rain, and instructed Hannibal with an intensity in his gaze. "Drag him far away for the walkers to eat."

Without a backward glance, Will turned on his heel, stomping back inside the jail, leaving the rain-soaked scene behind. The echoes of their shared chaos lingered, mingling with the relentless patter of raindrops against the wooden structure.

The rain outside continued its rhythmic dance, a backdrop to the disarray within the jailhouse. Will, arms crossed over his chest, leaned against the weathered wooden desk, staring intently at the pool of Clive's blood that had soaked into the floorboards. The energy still buzzed beneath his skin, a lingering reminder of the chaos they had unleashed.

Damn Hannibal, he thought. That man always got what he wanted. He had orchestrated this, played the strings of his puppets, and now Will found himself ensnared in a web of danger and desire. He couldn't deny the power Hannibal held over him, the pull that kept him tethered despite the dangers.

A deep breath escaped Will's lips, his thoughts a tumultuous storm in his mind. He couldn't shake the image of Hannibal, the way those maroon eyes looked at him after the kill. It sent shivers down his spine, a mixture of fear and something darker that he refused to name.

The teachings of his upbringing echoed in his mind, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil." Yet, here he was, having willingly walked into the embrace of darkness. Falling into the trap of temptation personified – Hannibal.

The thunder rumbled outside, mirroring the turmoil in Will's heart. He closed his eyes briefly, attempting to collect his thoughts, but the image of Hannibal's wicked smile persisted. A part of him despised Hannibal for leading him into this chaos, yet another part couldn't deny the allure of the danger and the intoxicating connection they shared.

Will knew he was stuck now. The threads had been woven, entwining his fate with Hannibal's. The rain continued, washing away the sins outside, while inside, the stains of blood and desire lingered, marking the beginning of a journey into the heart of darkness.

The tension in the air was palpable, and Will could feel the buzzing energy beneath his skin intensify. Fatigue weighed heavily on his shoulders, a result of the relentless games Hannibal played, always orchestrating events to suit his whims. Will had reached his limit, his patience worn thin like a frayed rope on the verge of snapping.

Hannibal had a knack for pushing Will's buttons, goading him into reactions. The probing, the antagonizing – it was all a game to him. And Will had grown tired of playing along.

Enough was enough.

Will's mind was chaotic, and he didn't care about consequences or what might come next. The energy from the recent events, the twisted satisfaction from dealing with Clive, it all converged into a volatile concoction within him. He needed an outlet, a way to release the pent-up frustration that threatened to consume him.

Hannibal reveled in eliciting reactions from Will, in probing the depths of his psyche. But this time, Will decided, the reaction would be on his terms. No more calculated moves, no more playing the puppet.

The door groaned under its own weight as Hannibal entered, a vision of wet elegance in the jail. Will's gaze fixated on him, head tilted just so, like a predator sizing up its prey.

Hannibal's presence was magnetic, drawing Will's attention in a way that sent a shiver down his spine.

Raindrops clung to Hannibal's hair, forming glistening droplets that fell like liquid diamonds. Will resisted the urge to close the distance between them.

Hannibal moved gracefully toward Will, his eyes, as ever, a tempest of maroon intensity. Will met the gaze head-on, a challenge in the narrowing of his eyes. The air thickened with an unspoken tension as Hannibal approached him step by measured step.

Without breaking eye contact, Hannibal reached around Will, his proximity enough to send a current of desire coursing through Will's veins. A barely perceptible tilt of Will's body betrayed the yearning beneath the surface, a silent acknowledgment of the intoxicating pull between them.

Hannibal nonchalantly placed his wet hat on the desk, the brim still glistening with raindrops. Will's resolve held firm, despite the urge to lean into the warmth radiating from Hannibal. The silence between them was heavy, charged with unspoken desires and unexplored boundaries.

Hannibal, always poised, always in control, finally broke the silence.

"I have done what you asked," Hannibal stated, his voice a low hum that resonated through the room. Will met his gaze, a storm brewing in his eyes.

"Good," Will replied tersely, the newfound confidence flickering within him. He held Hannibal's gaze with a piercing intensity, a silent demand for acknowledgment. It was a dangerous game he was playing.

He was playing with fire, aware that Hannibal reveled in such provocations. Yet, in this moment, Will embraced the flames, feeling their warmth on his skin. Hannibal once said, "It warms, it illuminates, and sometimes, it consumes." Will wondered if he was the one holding the match or if Hannibal was the puppet master orchestrating the blaze.

Will cast a glance toward the window, where the rain painted rivulets on the glass, distorting the world outside.

Hannibal's question cut through the quiet, his voice a smooth undertone beneath the rain's symphony. "Are you upset with me, Will?"

Will arched an eyebrow, meeting Hannibal's gaze with a cool stare. The sound of Hannibal's swallow, as evident as the bobbing of his Adam's apple, reverberated through the room. Will maintained his silence, letting the question linger in the air.

Instead of answering, Will posed a question of his own. "Are you pleased with the results, Hannibal? With what you've done?"

Hannibal's response was unhurried, his voice a velvety timbre. "Quite pleased, Will. You were magnificent."

The words hung in the air like mist after rain, and Will found himself resisting the inclination to blush at the unexpected compliment. Instead, he shifted his focus, raising his hands to his neck. The wet bandana clung to his skin, and he took his time unraveling it, each deliberate movement accentuated by the unbroken gaze of Hannibal.

The room held a quiet tension, the only sounds the muted pattering of raindrops outside and the soft rasp of fabric parting from damp skin. Hannibal's eyes, unblinking and discerning, traced the progression of Will's hands.

Will stepped closer to Hannibal, a subtle defiance in his posture. He tilted his chin upward, a challenge in his gaze that flickered over Hannibal's composed face. Rain-slicked hair framed Hannibal's features, and the muted light painted shadows across the lines etched in his skin.

"I had no doubt you'd be pleased, Hannibal," Will remarked, his voice a drawl that resonated with the echoes of the jail. "You're a chess player, ain't you? The world, your board. Pieces moved as you see fit. Knock 'em down if it suits you."

Circling Hannibal as he spoke, Will observed the tension in Hannibal's shoulders, the way his eyes followed Will's movements.

Moving to stand behind Hannibal, Will abruptly demanded, "Stay." Hannibal hesitated, blinked, and then gritted his teeth before complying. He turned back around, concealing the subtle frustration that Will's order had induced. Will grinned, even though he knew Hannibal couldn't see it.

"Ya know, Hannibal, it ain't so different from herding cattle," Will continued, his drawl thickening. "Sometimes, a stubborn one needs a firm hand to guide 'em in the right direction. Keeps the herd in order." Will reveled in this newfound confidence, he had found a way to turn the tables, if only for a moment.

"Expectin' me to put my knife to your throat again, were ya?" Will hummed, the sound lingering in the humid space. He sneered, adding, "That'd be somethin' you'd like, wouldn't it?"

Hannibal remained stoic, the silence an acknowledgment of Will's accusation. Determined, Will seized Hannibal's wrists, holding them in a firm grip. Leaning in, close enough to share breaths from behind, he demanded, "Answer me."

A quiet "yes" slipped from Hannibal's lips, a concession to Will's control. “Yes.” Will repeated it, a rhythmic echo, as he utilized his bandana to tie Hannibal's wrists together. He tightened the knot with purpose, a makeshift restraint forged from a piece of cloth.

"Seen enough of my knife tonight," Will muttered, his voice a low murmur, barely audible above the rain.

Hannibal, bound by makeshift restraints, clenched his fists in a gesture of restrained frustration. Will could see it, the flicker of annoyance beneath the surface, the discomfort of submission to a man who was supposed to be the one caught and controlled.

A dark laugh escaped Will's lips as he circled back in front of Hannibal, his expression unreadable. He studied the man before him, observing the play of emotions in Hannibal's dark eyes. The pupils were dilated, swallowing the color and turning them almost obsidian. Hannibal's voice cut through the tension, carrying an air of defiance.

"You've caught me, sheriff," Hannibal admitted, a sardonic twist to his words. He tilted his head, a feline grace in the movement. "Wanted dead or alive. I cannot imagine what the reward is for catching me."

Will's eyes bore into Hannibal's, the gleam in the latter's eyes resembling sharp blades reflecting the dim light. It was a dangerous dance, a battle of wills played out in the confined space of the jailhouse.

A slow, Southern drawl cut through the silence. "Get on your knees," Will commanded, his gaze unwavering. The words hung in the air, the weight of authority lacing every syllable. He could see the flicker of defiance in Hannibal's eyes, a predator momentarily unwilling to yield.

Hannibal blinked. Will raised an eyebrow, the threat implicit in his gaze. The room seemed to pulse with anticipation as seconds ticked by, each blink a measure of Hannibal's internal struggle. Will's voice, low and menacing, sliced through the quiet.

"I don't want to ask again," Will drawled, the accent lending a sharp edge to his words. He watched Hannibal shudder, a barely perceptible reaction that fueled the fire in Will's eyes. The defiance in Hannibal's stance began to wane, replaced by a hesitant compliance.

Will's gaze swiveled down, a smirk threatening to surface as he noticed the subtle shift in Hannibal's pants. "You seem mighty uncomfortable, partner. That rock in your pants bothersome?" he remarked, the drawl thickening with amusement.

The room crackled with tension as Hannibal glared and gracefully descended to his knees, blinking up through his lashes. Will, standing above him, felt a shiver run down his spine as he loomed over the man. Hannibal's inquiry cut through the silence.

"What do you plan to do with me, Sheriff?" Hannibal's voice, smooth and composed, held a hint of curiosity.

Will tsked. "Did I give you permission to speak?" he questioned, narrowing his eyes at Hannibal. The man tightened his jaw.

Stepping closer, Will raised his hand to grip Hannibal's chin lightly, the touch a calculated mixture of authority and desire. "You've kept secrets, manipulated, provoked me," Will stated, his voice a low murmur that carried the weight of unresolved tension. "I've had enough of you bein' bad, Hannibal. Can you be good for me now?"

Hannibal shivered. His gaze met Will's, a silent admission that hung in the air. He nodded, the subtle movement a concession to the understanding between them.

"Good," Will said, the word laden with a sense of finality. He felt a surge of exhilaration, a heady cocktail of power and desire that tingled beneath his skin. Will, in this moment, felt like a god, holding the reins of control.

Running his thumb over Hannibal's plush lips, Will continued, "You're just so pretty, ain’t you? Hm?" He studied Hannibal's face, savoring the vulnerability that lingered in the man's gaze. Hannibal, in response, snaked his tongue and ran it along Will's rough thumb.

Will shuddered at the sensation, the electric current of desire coursing through him. Slipping his thumb inside Hannibal's mouth, he watched with a predatory gaze as Hannibal responded. A deep breath escaped Will's lips, the intensity of the moment settling over them.

Raising an eyebrow, Will teased, "Eager?" Hannibal's glare, a defiance that burned like embers, met Will's gaze. Will, intoxicated by the thrill of control, couldn't help but revel in the moment. He took a deep breath.

"You've got spirit, I'll give you that," Will drawled, his accent dripping with amusement. "But don't think for a second that I'm lettin' you have your way so easily."

Curling his thumb down, Will used it to guide Hannibal's face closer to his crotch. Hannibal nuzzled against his hardness, and Will had to bite back a groan at the sight of those intense eyes looking up at him.

Will chuckled, the sound a low rumble. "I enjoy knowin' that, for once, I've got you right where I want you."

Will withdrew his thumb from Hannibal's mouth, a satisfied grin playing on his lips. "Stand up," he commanded. Hannibal rose with an elegance that bordered on defiance, tilting his head in a silent acknowledgment of the unfolding intimacy.

Will's grin widened as he patted the desk behind them. "Sit," he ordered, the word a low hum that resonated through the charged air. Hannibal sighed blissfully and hopped up to perch on the sheriff's desk. Will walked forward, his boots echoing in the silence of the room, and caged his arms around Hannibal. Their lower bodies pressed together, and Will's breath hitched at the electrifying contact.

Reaching up, Will began unbuttoning the top buttons of Hannibal's shirt. His heart raced with a mixture of desire and anticipation, though his face remained a stoic mask.

Roughly moving Hannibal's collar aside, Will noticed a small gold locket around Hannibal's neck. His fingers moved toward it instinctively, but Hannibal flinched back. Will raised an eyebrow, and Hannibal shook his head, a silent plea for restraint. Will nodded, understanding.

Continuing to unbutton Hannibal's clothes, Will's fingers worked with a deliberate slowness. "Is that what was stolen from you?" he asked, granting Hannibal permission to speak. “It was Mischa’s.” Hannibal's voice, a velvet murmur, confirmed it was his sister's locket.

Will hummed thoughtfully. "Reckon those men deserved to die, then," he stated, the words carrying a weight that hung in the air. Hannibal's eyes gleamed with a spark of something that resonated with Will's own darkness. The cowboy sighed, the tension between them palpable, and continued his task.

The skin revealed beneath the unbuttoned shirt drew Will's gaze like a moth to a flame. His eyes traced the contours of Hannibal's hairy, strong, muscled chest, captivated by the sight. Sliding Hannibal's shirt off his shoulders, Will let it pool around his forearms. His hands moved over Hannibal's skin, a gentle exploration that revealed the beauty he had never seen before.

Will's lips trailed down Hannibal's neck, a slow descent that left a searing trail of heat in its wake. He couldn't deny the anticipation coursing through him, the desire that burned like a fever in his veins. Pausing at Hannibal's broad shoulder, he lifted his gaze to meet the man’s eyes.

"How did it feel?" Will asked, his drawl thick with the intoxication of the moment. Hannibal swallowed heavily.

As he moved to unbutton his own shirt, Will inquired further, his voice a rough murmur, "How did it feel to rip their throats out?" Hannibal shuddered, a visceral reaction that mirrored the dark satisfaction in his eyes. "Powerful," he whispered, the word hanging in the air like a forbidden confession.

Will's breathing quickened, becoming more ragged with every passing moment. The control he clung to was slipping away, but he didn't care. Sick, he thought, sick, but the thrill of the darkness was too intoxicating to resist. His shirt fell to the floor, revealing a chest smoother than Hannibal's, his skin rougher, marked by the harshness of his own existence. A smirk played on Will's lips as Hannibal's eyes roamed over him. The power dynamics were shifting, a subtle dance of dominance and submission.

Hannibal swallowed audibly, a request on his lips. "I want to touch you, please. Release my hands," he warned, but Will clucked his tongue in response. "No," he replied, defiance lacing his words. Hannibal, persistent, uttered a warning, his tone laden with authority. "Will."

But Will was unyielding, his own desires taking precedence. Moving in to kiss Hannibal, he whispered against his lips, "What about what I want?" The question lingered in the air as their lips met, a collision of desires, a merging of two chaotic souls.

Hannibal asked in a low murmur, "And what is it you want, Will?" The question hung between them, a challenge and an invitation, as the room pulsed with the rhythm of their

shared desires.

Will's hands slid under Hannibal, effortlessly guiding him off the desk until he stood on the floor once more. The air hung thick with desire as Will pressed his lips against Hannibal's neck, the hunger within him threatening to spill over. He felt like a powder keg, ready to explode with the intensity of his yearning.

A low hum escaped Will's throat as he wedged a thigh between Hannibal's legs and bucked his hips, a primal rhythm that elicited an audible gasp from the older man. Grinning, Will asked, "You like that?" Hannibal nodded eagerly, his own desires laid bare before the relentless force of Will's passion.

Chuckling, Will muttered, "What am I goin' to do with you, huh?" He reached up to run his hands through Hannibal's damp hair, savoring the silkiness beneath his fingertips. Moving down, Will cupped Hannibal's jaw, his touch both possessive and tender. With a rough determination, he unbuckled their belts, the anticipation of what was to come coursing through him.

Reaching down, he slipped his hand inside Hannibal's pants and took Hannibal's thick cock in hand, running his fingers over the hardness, where precome pooled at the top. The warmth of Hannibal's cock against his skin sent shivers through Will. He muttered, "Christ."

Hannibal's eyes rolled back, and he buried his head on Will's shoulder, breathing roughly. Will dipped his head to nip at Hannibal's cheek, his movements becoming rougher, faster, and merciless. Hannibal writhed between Will's hands, caught in the whirlwind of sensations. Will rolled his hips against Hannibal's leg, the rhythm building with the intensity of their shared desires.

"Do you like that, Hannibal?" Will muttered, his voice a low rasp. Hannibal responded with a flurry of words in Italian and French, a symphony of languages escaping him as Will continued to stroke his cock faster. Cursing, Will used his free hand to pull Hannibal's hair, guiding his head up for a searing kiss.

"You arrogant son of a bitch," Will growled, the words a mixture of frustration and desire. His hips moved faster, the pace escalating as he cursed and stroked Hannibal with unbridled fervor. Will felt like he was going mad, a madness that mirrored the chaos within him.

Will's breaths were ragged as he looked at Hannibal, a mixture of lust and madness reflected in his eyes. "You know how damn crazy you make me, Hannibal?" he rasped, his voice thick with desire. In response, Hannibal nipped at Will's earlobe, a teasing gesture that only fueled the intensity between them.

The pace quickened, and Will, lost in the frenzy, posed another question. "Is this what you wanted?" His lips crashed against Hannibal's, a collision of desire and frustration that left them both breathless.

Hannibal, his breath ragged, spoke words of admiration. "You were perfect, Will. Wielding your knife, taking a man's life. I have never seen anything so beautiful." The praise, warped and twisted, hung in the air like a forbidden fruit.

Licking the sweat from Hannibal's neck, Will couldn't resist a sardonic remark. "Enjoyin' being in Clive's place now?" Laughter, tinged with both amusement and defiance, escaped him. "Should I ask you ten questions, Hannibal?"

As the pace of their dance quickened, Hannibal's moan mingled with the humid air. "God, you're pretty," Will groaned, his fingers entangled in Hannibal's hair. "Those beautiful eyes of yours," he added, his words punctuated by the relentless rhythm of their movements.

Fueled by the building desire, Will moved faster, his grip on Hannibal's cock unrelenting. "Come for me, darlin'," he murmured, the endearment slipping out naturally, wrapped in the drawl of his southern accent. Hannibal writhed faster, biting Will's shoulder as he shuddered. Hannibal pulsed in Will's hand, the come running down his fingers. Will shivered as he felt Hannibal's teeth on his shoulder and cursed, his own explosion of lust echoing through his entire being.

With a surge of desire, Will pulled Hannibal up and kissed him fiercely. He reached to untie Hannibal's hands, feeling Hannibal's fingers immediately running through his hair. The touch sent shivers down Will's spine, his senses overwhelmed by the intoxicating connection they shared.

Sticky hand raised, Will slammed both hands on the desk behind Hannibal. He laid his head on Hannibal's shoulder, breathing heavily, the aftermath of their shared passion settling over them. Hannibal breathed shakily, his words cutting through the charged air, "With all my knowledge and intrusion... I could never entirely predict you."

Will huffed a laugh, raising his head to meet Hannibal's gaze. With a surge of passion, he kissed Hannibal again, interrupting any further words. "Shut the hell up," Will muttered between kisses.

Will reached for his bandana, tenderly using it to clean the lingering traces of their passion from both of them. A hushed silence settled over the room as he struggled to find the right words. His lips found Hannibal's skin, nipping at it softly, unable to articulate the emotions swirling within him. He whispered, "God..."

Hannibal huffed a laugh, the sound reverberating in the stillness. "Your bandanas seem to make a habit of being covered with my bodily fluids," he remarked, a hint of amusement in his voice. Will shot him a glare, his patience wearing thin. Without a word, he threw the bandana on the ground and cupped Hannibal's face, leaning in for another kiss.

Mutters passed between their lips, acknowledging the reality of their situation. "We're sick sons of bitches," Will murmured against Hannibal's mouth. Hannibal responded, "I wish everyone were as sick as you, Will."

"Are you still upset with me?" Hannibal's question cut through the post-coital haze, his tone laced with a touch of sarcasm.

Will chuckled, a low, throaty sound that echoed in the room. "I reckon I'm always upset with you."

Hannibal smirked, a subtle satisfaction playing on his lips. "If this is how you react when you are upset, Will, I might need to upset you more often."

Will looked deep into Hannibal's eyes, feeling his heart melt at the sight of this man, so insane, beautiful, and feral. Gripping Hannibal's chin, Will couldn't help but wonder about the

future. "What are we gonna do now, Hannibal, hm? We're bein’ hunted by a bunch of cannibals," he asked, his mouth curling into a wry grin.

Hannibal, ever composed, replied, "We will cross that bridge when we get to it." Will shook his head, a possessiveness coiling within him. He'd always been protective of what was his, snarling and snapping if anyone dared to encroach on his territory. Hannibal's hands ran up and down his back, and Will leaned in to press a kiss to his forehead.

"Hannibal," Will hummed, his voice carrying the weight of curiosity, "how in the hell did Luther's group manage to find you?"

Hannibal sighed contentedly in Will's arms, a picture of almost adorable pliancy, reminiscent of a tamed lion. He began recounting the tale, his voice a smooth cadence in the room. "I came across Luther's group in Deadwood."

Deadwood – a name Will knew from his early days in the West. It was one of the first towns to go rogue, a place where the thin veil of civility often gave way to lawlessness.

"What happened then?" Will inquired, his gaze never leaving Hannibal's face.

Hannibal continued, revealing the events that transpired. "I attempted to trade civilly, but Luther's men were entirely impolite. They captured me, stripped me of all my supplies, and took Mischa's locket."

Will's breath caught at the mention of Mischa's locket. The anger radiating from Hannibal's eyes turned them as dark as the night. A primal urge for vengeance, an old wound reopened.

"And then?" Will prompted, his tone a quiet encouragement.

"They deserted me after robbing me," Hannibal explained. "I hunted them down. Luther, however, I have never seen. I suspect he did not take kindly to the present I left him."

"Thought I was Luther for a moment, did ya?" Will teased, a smirk playing on his lips.

Hannibal's lips curled into a wry smile. "I was almost loathe to kill you because of how beautiful you are," he confessed, the dark humor not lost on either of them.

Will snorted, the tension between them momentarily broken. "Well, ain't that sweet of you."

Hannibal kissed Will's shoulder gently, a caress that carried both intimacy and reassurance. "I suspect sending Clive was merely a warning. Not a genuine attempt to kill us."

A scowl crept across Will's face. Luther's actions seemed more like the opening moves of a dangerous game, where the pieces were lives and the stakes were higher than ever. "Well," Will muttered, his voice a low growl, "I don't take kindly to threats, Hannibal. We'll deal with him, one way or another."

He knew they were screwed.

Will's mind echoed with the options, the paths that diverged ahead, each leading to its own kind of darkness. The logical part of him, the one that had survived the harshness of the frontier, whispered that he should kill Hannibal. Leave his lifeless body for Luther or whoever the hell was tracking them to find. He could slip away like a phantom, vanish into the vast expanse of the wilderness unscathed, just as he always had.

But something had changed tonight. Will had realized he wasn't the same cowboy anymore.

The chaos they had unleashed, the primal dance of violence and desire, had unlocked a side of Will he hadn't known existed. It pulsed beneath his skin, a dark energy that whispered promises of untold power and danger. The events of the night had carved a new path in the dusty terrain of his soul, one he couldn't ignore or deny.

People were hunting Hannibal, and that meant they were hunting Will. Will hated being trailed.

The shackles of his past, the sins he had committed in the name of survival, threatened to tighten around him. Will had roamed these lands, a lone figure in the vast expanse, and he had killed hundreds of men without a blink of an eye.

He'd do it again. He will. For Hannibal.

Hannibal's contented hum reverberated through the air as he gracefully rose out of Will's arms. Will watched as Hannibal mysteriously walked outside, leaving the jail’s shelter. The urge to follow him tugged at Will, a visceral instinct to stay close to the man that had woven itself into the fabric of his turbulent existence.

Resisting the impulse, Will waited patiently, his boots scuffing softly against the floorboards. Moments later, the door creaked open, and Hannibal reappeared, his form glistening with raindrops. The book, miraculously untouched by the weather, rested in his hand. Will couldn't help but grin, his eyes tracing the water droplets that clung to Hannibal's bare chest. The man's ability to maintain an air of sophistication, even while soaked to the bone, was nothing short of mesmerizing.

With the book held out like an offering, Hannibal approached Will. "We must continue to see what young Werther is up to," Hannibal declared, his voice a smooth melody that resonated with a mixture of mystery and allure.

Will chuckled, a low and genuine sound, shaking his head as if dispelling the gravity of their situation. "Don't we have more pressin' matters to attend to?" His mind reminded him of the looming problems that could unravel the fragile sanctuary they had found.

But then he looked at Hannibal, a creature so different from the world Will had known. A man with madness in his eyes and a regal bearing that defied the chaos around them. He

wanted to hate it, to resist the tendrils of emotion that wrapped around his heart, but it was futile.

Will's gaze lingered on Hannibal's form, the rain-kissed skin, the subtle curve of his lips. A torrent of conflicting emotions surged within him—desire, uncertainty, a yearning for something he couldn't name. For the first time in years, Will felt alive, and the only thing echoing in the chambers of his heart was the insatiable want for more.

Hannibal gracefully settled on the floor beside Will, and with a gesture both princely and inviting, he patted the spot behind him. Will couldn't help but roll his eyes at the theatricality of it, yet he complied, sinking down onto the rough wooden surface. The jail’s quietude enveloped them, the echoes of their recent actions lingering like ghosts.

The book opened in Hannibal's hands. Will observed as Hannibal, this man of contradictions, took Will's hand in his own. The touch was gentle, a stark contrast to the feral essence that surrounded Hannibal and Will himself. Will wondered how someone so elegant and poised could also carry the weight of something inherently primal.

In the hushed ambiance, Hannibal studied Will, his gaze a caress that left Will feeling both seen and exposed. Then, with a soft smile, Hannibal proposed a role reversal. "Would you like to read this time?" he asked, as if extending an invitation to a waltz.

Will shook his head, a rueful grin playing on his lips. "Never learned much when I was a kid, and sure couldn't after the outbreak."

Hannibal's smile deepened, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "I will teach you," he offered, a promise wrapped in the simplicity of those words. The notion of learning, of engaging in an activity so trivial yet laden with a peculiar significance, felt both absurd and comforting.

"We're too old for this," Will remarked, the corners of his mouth quirking in a half-smile. Yet, beneath that pragmatic observation, there was a sense of surrender. In this lawless land, where morality had become a relic and society a distant memory, the rules were a relic of the past. It was every man for himself, and in this makeshift sanctuary, Will and Hannibal found themselves side by side.

There was an undeniable irony in the tableau they painted—two men, reading to each other after having just taken a life. The dichotomy of their existence, the dance between civilization and savagery, seemed to unravel with each turn of the page.

Will nodded, leaning in closer to Hannibal, his focus narrowing down to the words nestled on the pages of the book in Hannibal's lap.

As Will began to read, his voice stumbled over the words, the act of reading foreign on his tongue. "God of heaven, and is this the destiny of man?" he started, his brows furrowing in concentration. Hannibal, ever composed and patient, observed Will's struggle. A hint of amusement danced in his eyes as he aided Will, filling in the words that Will found difficult to pronounce.

Hannibal's refined voice seamlessly interwove with Will's rugged Southern drawl as he assisted. "Is he only happy before he has acquired his reason, or after he has lost it?" he smoothly added, guiding Will.

Will cursed under his breath as he stumbled over the next passage. It was an odd sensation—just moments ago, he had faced danger without hesitation, and now he found himself grappling with the vulnerability of reading aloud. His cheeks flushed, a warmth spreading across his face. How absurd, he thought, after all they had just been through, to feel self-conscious over words.

Hannibal, a steady presence at his side, continued to assist him, his voice carrying an air of refinement that contrasted with Will's unpolished cadence. "I have so much in me," they read, voices betraying the depth of the emotions woven into the text, "and the feeling for her absorbs it all; I have so much, and without her, it all comes to nothing."

Hannibal, like a patient tutor, repeated the challenging words, helping Will pronounce them with a grace that spoke of a different world—a world before the outbreak, a world of harpsichords and orchestras and art. Each word, a shared journey between them, pulled Will into a strange intimacy. He stole glances at Hannibal, their eyes locking in moments of silent connection.

The realization of their proximity, of the shared endeavor, made Will's heart quicken. The vulnerability of the act, the shared exploration of a world confined within the pages, felt

strangely liberating. Will was no longer the solitary cowboy navigating the vastness of the wilderness; he was part of a duet, where Hannibal's refined notes complemented his rugged melody.

Will leaned in closer, the warmth of the moment wrapping around him like a comforting shroud. He marveled at the tender strangeness of it all, the feeling that seemed to surge through him, making his heart beat to the same rhythm as Hannibal's pulse. It was a sensation he couldn't quite put a name to, an emotion that defied the harsh realities of the world they inhabited.

The moonlight cast a soft glow over the scene, creating an atmosphere of quiet intimacy. Will felt the resonance of shared words and shared glances, a connection that transcended the decaying walls around them. He could almost hear the echoes of their hushed voices, woven into the fabric of the old building.

As he looked at Hannibal, the lines of the man's face were etched in his memory. There, in the flickering shadows, was an image of Hannibal that had imprinted itself on the back of Will's eyelids, a portrait that lingered long after their eyes had met and then looked away.

The tenderness of the moment struck Will like an arrow to the heart. It was a peculiar feeling, both unfamiliar and strangely welcome. He didn't quite understand it, this gentle warmth that enveloped him. Yet, the more he experienced it, the more he found himself drawn to it.

Will had faced many challenges in the unforgiving landscape outside, but this—this was a different kind of frontier. It was uncharted territory, a territory where emotions were as wild and unpredictable as the untamed land that stretched beyond the jail doors.

Will's eyes lingered on Hannibal's face, studying the features that seemed to tell a story of a life before the outbreak, a life of refinement and art. There was a softness in Hannibal's gaze, an understanding that went beyond the spoken words. And as they continued to share the words from the old book, Will pressed in closer, seeking refuge in this newfound tenderness.

His gaze, fixed on Hannibal, held a silent promise—a promise that transcended the spoken word, an unspoken agreement that they were in this together, no matter what lay ahead. The impending danger, the hunters closing in like vultures scenting prey, didn't daunt Will as

much as he had claimed only moments ago. He was ready, a coiled spring ready to unleash its force when the time came.

He didn't know what would come of this strange alliance or where the unpredictable currents of life would take them. Yet, in that quiet moment, surrounded by the scent of aged leather and rain-soaked earth, Will felt a sense of peace. The world outside may have been harsh and unforgiving, but within the confines of the decaying walls, something delicate and pure blossomed. It felt sweet and tender, like the first bloom of spring in a world overrun by desolation.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The air was thick with the lingering scent of rain as Will and Hannibal ran, their laughter blending with the rustling of grass beneath their boots. The wet ground squelched beneath Will's weight, each step sending a jolt of exhilaration through him. The sky above stretched endlessly, a canvas of muted colors, still recovering from the passing storm.

Will's breaths were ragged, his chest heaving as he raced across the field. He stole a glance over his shoulder, a genuine smile stretching across his face as he saw Hannibal in pursuit. Hannibal's hat sat at a slight angle, his shirt half-unbuttoned, revealing glistening skin that caught his sweat like diamonds.

The laughter that bubbled from Will's chest was unbridled and infectious, echoing through the vast expanse of the field. He felt a freedom he hadn't experienced in a long while, the weight of his responsibilities momentarily forgotten in the thrill of the chase. The dry, dusty air was replaced by the scent of damp earth and the lingering aroma of rain-soaked vegetation.

As Hannibal closed the distance between them, his strides steady and measured, Will's laughter only intensified. It was a sound foreign to his own ears, a melody of joy that seemed to resonate with the rhythm of their pounding footsteps.

Will's eyes danced with mirth as he cast another glance over his shoulder, a challenge in his gaze. Hannibal's expression was a mix of determination and amusement, the wildness of the chase sparking something untamed within them both.

They ran like two coyotes, creatures of the untamed wilderness, moving with an innate grace that belied the darkness that lingered in their pasts. The wind whispered through the grass, carrying with it the promise of freedom, if only for this fleeting moment.

Will's boots beat against the soft ground, his breaths mingling with the air. He felt alive, unburdened by the shackles of his own mind, lost in the simplicity of the chase. The laughter continued, a raw, unrestrained symphony that echoed through like a call to the wild.

They had left the jail in haste, leaving behind the remnants of a bloody scene. Will had been adamant about their swift departure, a sense of urgency guiding his every move.

Hannibal, albeit reluctantly, had agreed to the hurried escape, rising from the cocoon of Will's arms with a languid grace. Will wished they could linger, hold onto that fleeting moment of solace a little longer, but reality pressed in around them. The world had unraveled into chaos, and they were but two figures running from the impending tempest.

A collision sent both men tumbling to the ground, a cacophony of laughter and grunts filling the air. Will wrestled with Hannibal, their bodies entwined in a chaotic dance of limbs as they rolled over the hard earth. The sun beat down on them, casting long shadows in the open land.

"Damn it, Hannibal, you fight like a snake in a rabbit hole!" Will exclaimed, chuckling as he grappled with the man beneath him. .

Curses mingled with laughter as they continued their playful struggle. Will managed to push Hannibal off him and swiftly rose to his feet. "Come on, slowpoke!" he teased, taunting Hannibal as he darted away, his boots kicking up dust in the hot sun.

The chase resumed, and Will could feel Hannibal's swift pursuit, a lethal force on his trail. The adrenaline surged through Will as he ran, the thrill of the chase electrifying the air. He glanced over his shoulder, grinning at the sight of Hannibal closing in.

But the relentless predator that was Hannibal finally seized Will's wrist, a firm grip that brought their chase to an end. Will laughed breathlessly, his chest rising and falling with exertion. He crashed into Hannibal's chest, their bodies colliding in a display of exhilaration.

"Hannibal, you damn scorpion, got me fair and square," Will admitted, his laughter lingering in the air. He reached up to adjust Hannibal's hat, his fingers lingering on the well-worn brim. Will's hand moved down to cup Hannibal's cheek, his thumb tracing the sharp line of Hannibal's cheekbone.

Hannibal's smile was a rare and genuine expression, a sight that never failed to captivate Will. "Are you planning to run again, cowboy?" Hannibal inquired, the accent in his voice adding a playful cadence to the words.

Will bit his lip, a mischievous grin tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Nope," he drawled, the accent thickening with each word, "think I've had my fill of runnin' for today. I reckon I'll stay right here, enjoyin' the view."

The land stretched endlessly, a canvas painted in hues of gold by the radiant sun. The laughter and the chase had subsided, leaving Will and Hannibal in a tranquil embrace. Will felt the warmth of the sun against his skin, the earthy scent of the field surrounding them. There was a sense of freedom, a stolen moment of respite from the chaos that trailed their every step.

Hannibal turned his face, lips grazing Will's palm in a tender kiss. Will's heart fluttered at the unexpected gesture. The compliment that followed, spoken with Hannibal's characteristic eloquence, left Will blushing. "Beautiful," Hannibal murmured, "a lovely-eyed boy."

Will huffed, shaking his head in mock disapproval. "You talk too fancy for your own good, Hannibal," he teased. "I ain't no damn boy, and you know it."

Hannibal's gaze held a warmth that matched the sun above. "To me, you are," he insisted, a softness in his tone that spoke of more than just words. Will felt a flutter of something indescribable, a mixture of joy and warmth.

They were playing, wasting precious time they could ill afford. The world outside their little haven was unforgiving, and danger lurked in every shadow. Yet, as the sun bathed them in its golden glow, Will found it hard to care about the ticking clock or the miles left to travel.

Turning within Hannibal's arms, Will huffed and let out a mock complaint. "I swear, I'll fall asleep right on my damn feet if you keep holdin' me like this."

Hannibal's arms tightened around Will's waist, a reassuring embrace. "I'll be here to catch you," he promised, the sincerity in his voice cutting through the playful banter.

Will's lips curved into a smile, genuine and carefree. "You're a regular romantic, ain't you, Hannibal?" he teased, the words light on his tongue. The simplicity of the moment, the shared laughter, and the warmth of Hannibal's arms created a sanctuary in the midst of uncertainty.

Hannibal's lips curved into a fond smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Only for you, Will."

The night before lingered in Will's mind like the haunting strains of a half-remembered melody. Hannibal, the devil incarnate, had knelt before him, a surrender that felt like the sweetest victory. In the quiet of the field, the echoes of that night reverberated through Will's thoughts.

Hannibal's submission was a dance with the inferno, a plunge into the depths of desire and darkness that stirred something profound within Will. The devil was in the details, they said, and Hannibal embodied that sentiment in every lingering touch and whispered promise. It was an experience unlike anything Will had encountered, a collision of sin and salvation that left him craving more.

Hannibal felt like fire beneath Will's fingertips, a warmth that seared and caressed simultaneously. Will could almost taste the flames, the flickering embers that danced to a rhythm only they understood. It was intoxicating, a blend of danger and desire that left Will breathless.

As Hannibal knelt before him, a symbol of submission, he was more than a man. He felt like doves in flight, ethereal and untamed, their wings brushing against the edges of Will's soul. It was a paradox—Hannibal, both the captor and the captive, a riddle that demanded unraveling.

River water flooding around his bones—that was Hannibal. Fluid and unpredictable, carving pathways through the landscape of Will's desires. The current of their connection ran deep, and Will found himself willingly swept away, relinquishing control to the rush of emotion and sensation.

The memories played in fragments, a kaleidoscope of images and sensations. The taste of Hannibal's skin, the scent of sweat and earth, the sound of whispered confessions in the hushed night. Hannibal was a sin in and of himself, a forbidden fruit that Will now craved with an intensity that bordered on blasphemy.

The night had unfolded like a secret pact, a covenant written in the silent exchanges between them. Hannibal, once the puppeteer, had willingly handed the strings to Will. It was a power that left Will both invigorated and humbled, a realization that he could command the forces that once seemed beyond his grasp.

He knew now, with a certainty that bordered on recklessness, that he would live his life blaspheming if it meant having Hannibal in his hands again.

Will shifted back, distancing himself from Hannibal. The question lingered, a quiet murmur in the restless wind that rustled through the field. "Why’d you let me?" Will's voice, a rough whisper, carried the weight of uncertainty.

Hannibal, with that wicked smile that seemed to know more than it let on, responded with a hum that resonated through the space between them. "I found myself weakened to you, Will," he confessed, his words like a serpent's hiss, entwining around the essence of their connection. "A mere breath of air, a formless thing that only thought of you."

Will's breath caught in his throat at the admission. The vulnerability in Hannibal's words was as unsettling as it was intriguing. Hannibal, the orchestrator of manipulation and control, admitting a vulnerability to him felt like a seismic shift in their dynamic. Will's eyes searched Hannibal's face for the truth, the gleam in those maroon orbs reflecting a dance of shadows and secrets.

Will shook his head, as if trying to dispel the fog of confusion that settled in his mind. "I enjoyed it," he admitted, the admission heavy with a weight he couldn't shake. "Killing Clive,

I mean, it felt..." Will hesitated, the words catching in his throat, "It felt good, and I wasn't supposed to enjoy it."

Hannibal shook his head in response. There was an understanding, an unspoken acknowledgment of the twisted pleasure they had found in that dark moment. It was a confession that lingered in the humid air, a shared secret that bound them together in ways that went beyond the physical.

Will's gaze lingered on Hannibal, his mind grappling with the contradictions and complexities of the emotions that surged within him. The dance with the devil left its marks, indelible stains on the canvas of his soul.

Hannibal's next words, smooth as honey but carrying the weight of truth, wrapped around the threads of their connection. "You were beautiful, Will," he murmured. "The gleam in your eyes was sharp and bright as you tortured Clive. I could not resist you."

"Doing bad things to bad people makes us feel good, does it not?," he asked. His maroon eyes held a glint of satisfaction, a recognition of the shared indulgence in the darkness that now enveloped them.

Will scoffed, his southern drawl emphasizing the disbelief in his response. "It wasn't supposed to be somethin' fun," he retorted, the weight of the recent events pressing on his conscience. Will was a man who killed when he had to, swift and precise. But the visceral pleasure he derived from the cruelty inflicted upon Clive had unsettled the delicate balance he had maintained.

The devil before him, elegant and unapologetic, inclined his head, awaiting Will's revelation. "How did it feel?" Hannibal inquired, a dangerous curiosity dancing in his eyes.

Will hesitated, grappling with the conflicting emotions that surged within him. "It felt righteous," he admitted, the admission hanging in the air like a confession. The words, spoken with a blend of uncertainty and conviction, drew a smile from Hannibal.

"Righteous," Hannibal echoed, savoring the word as if it held the essence of their shared sin. "You were bestowing judgment, Will."

The acknowledgment, though wrapped in the guise of understanding, weighed heavily on Will's conscience. The realization that he had not only taken a life but reveled in the act troubled the cowboy. He glanced around the field, the untouched expanse stretching out before them, seemingly oblivious to the moral quandaries that tormented the souls of men.

Hannibal's next words, uttered with an almost blasphemous certainty, reverberated through the air. "We are bound by the same sin, Will. God does not care."

Will met Hannibal's gaze, the intensity of maroon eyes locking with the storm within his own blue depths. A bitter truth resonated in his chest – an acceptance that in the vast expanse of this wilderness, where the rules of society held no sway, they were beholden only to the darkness that entwined them.

Will nodded, a tacit agreement that echoed through the field. He couldn't bring himself to care about anything beyond the man standing before him, the arms wrapped around his waist, and the warmth that permeated his being despite the stickiness of their sweat-soaked skin.

"I know," Will whispered.

Will and Hannibal rode side by side on their horses. The rhythmic beat of hooves against the earth echoed in the stillness, a steady cadence that underscored the tension in the air. Will squinted into the distance, his gaze scanning the seemingly endless landscape for any sign of approaching danger.

The cowboy's expression was focused, a hardened determination etched into the lines of his face. He wasn't afraid—fear was a luxury rarely afforded in the lawless expanse of the West.

No, Will Graham was vigilant, eyes sharp and senses attuned to the subtle shifts in the wind that might herald the arrival of trouble.

Beside him, Hannibal hummed, a melodic tune that seemed incongruous with the harsh realities they faced. The devil on horseback regarded Will with a casual curiosity. His question cut through the rhythmic sounds of their journey.

"What is your plan, Will?" Hannibal inquired, his voice a low timbre that carried an undercurrent of intrigue. He seemed unperturbed by the looming threat, as if danger were a familiar companion.

Will scowled, his eyes narrowing at the man beside him. "This is your damn problem anyway," he retorted, his southern drawl giving an extra edge to his words. "What's your plan?"

Hannibal tilted his head, a gesture that exuded an air of calculated nonchalance. "We will kill the men," he stated matter-of-factly, as if the solution were as simple as the declaration itself.

Will rolled his eyes, the simplicity of Hannibal's response frustrating him. "That's damn obvious," he muttered, a trace of irritation in his tone. Will wasn't accustomed to planning; he'd lived his life like a tumbleweed, drifting where the winds of fate carried him, shedding anything that hindered his path. Except for Hannibal.

Frowning, Will contemplated the unfamiliar territory of strategic thinking. Luther was a relentless adversary, and the nature of the West meant that their survival hinged on more than just quick draws and sharp knives.

"I never was much for planning," Will admitted, his voice tinged with a mixture of reluctance and self-awareness. "But Luther won't stop until one of us is dead, and I aim to be the one still breathin'."

Will chewed on his cheeks, a nervous habit he couldn't shake, especially in moments like these when the weight of decisions pressed on his shoulders.

"I only got so much ammo," Will muttered, more to himself than to Hannibal, his eyes fixed on the distant landscape. The cowboy seldom relied on his gun, a Colt that hung from his hip, a tool more for intimidation than outright violence. He believed in using bullets sparingly, reserving them for situations where the stakes were truly worth the expenditure.

A wicked smile curved on Hannibal’s lips as he posed a question, his voice a smooth timbre cutting through the prairie breeze.

"Am I worth a bullet, Will?" Hannibal asked, his maroon eyes gleaming with mischief.

Will scowled, his irritation evident. He ignored Hannibal's question, the idea of admitting such a sentiment aloud grating against his nature. Will was a man of few words, especially when it came to revealing the intricacies of his feelings. He tightened his grip on the reins, fingers working restlessly.

The cowboy mulled it over. If push came to shove, if Luther's pursuit turned into an unavoidable confrontation, he'd use every damn bullet in his Colt. Hannibal knew the answer, of course. It was more about hearing Will say it, to extract the admission from the cowboy's stubborn pride.

"You know the answer," Will grumbled, his gaze still fixed on the horizon, avoiding the devil's smirk beside him.

Hannibal continued to wear that infuriating smile, his tone dripping with sardonic amusement. "Perhaps," he replied, leaving the answer in the realm of ambiguity.

Will shot Hannibal a sidelong glance, his scowl deepening. "You're a fuckin’ bastard, you know that?" he muttered, his fingers absentmindedly playing with the frayed edges of his weathered hat.

Hannibal clicked his tongue, a reproachful sound. "Language, Will," he reprimanded, feigning a sense of moral decorum.

Will chuckled, a rough and wry sound that echoed across the prairie. "If you didn't like my swearin', you should've said that a long damn time ago," he retorted.

Will regarded Hannibal with a frown, contemplating the practicalities of their uncertain future. His eyes narrowed as he asked, "You any good with a gun, Hannibal?"

Hannibal tilted his head, a gleam in his maroon eyes. "I have shot one on a number of occasions, but I prefer to rely on more natural implements," he replied, a subtle reference to his formidable teeth.

Will chuckled, the sound carrying over the open landscape. "Like your damn teeth?"

A small, self-satisfied smile curved Hannibal's lips. "Indeed," he said.

Will shook his head, his drawl accentuating his amusement. "We don't know how many men are comin'. Your teeth won't take down an army."

Hannibal bristled, his pride momentarily wounded. "You vastly underestimate me, Will."

Rolling his eyes, Will decided it was time to impart some practical wisdom. He halted his horse, dismounting with a thud as his boots met the ground. Hannibal observed him, an air of curiosity in his gaze as Will reached for his Colt.

"Get off your horse," Will commanded, his tone leaving no room for argument. "I'm teachin' you how to hold it properly."

Hannibal, gracefully complying, dismounted from his horse. Will took a moment to examine the man beside him. Hannibal was no supernatural entity here—just a man with a thirst for blood and an uncanny charm.

Will stood beside Hannibal, a smirk playing on his lips as he raised his Colt, the barrel pointed into the vastness of the prairie. He took a moment to enjoy the weight of the firearm in his hands before turning his gaze toward Hannibal.

"Now, it's all about the stance," Will began, his drawl lingering in the air. "You gotta spread your legs, shoulder-width apart. It gives you stability. Plant yourself like a damn oak tree, understand?"

Hannibal nodded, his maroon eyes fixed on Will's every movement.

"Good," Will continued, enjoying the role of the instructor. "Square your shoulders, relax your arms. You ain't wrestlin' a bear, you're aimin' a gun. Keep your back straight, and for God's sake, focus on what you're doin'."

He demonstrated, mimicking the motions of aiming and shooting, complete with a mouthed "bang." Will handed the Colt to Hannibal, expecting him to follow suit.

"Now you try," Will instructed, his smirk widening.

Hannibal narrowed his eyes, adopting the stance Will had just demonstrated. However, as Will observed, it became apparent that Hannibal's posture was all wrong. Will clicked his tongue in disapproval.

"Focus, Hannibal. I ain't teachin' you this for my own amusement," Will scolded, snatching the Colt back from Hannibal's hands. He repeated the motions, each step articulated with a stern precision.

Hannibal, unfazed, watched Will with a smirk playing on his lips. "This is quite educational, Will," he commented, his eyes trailing down to the muscles in Will's arms. "I'm learning more than I anticipated."

Will sighed, irritation flickering across his features. "Focus, damn it."

He handed the Colt back to Hannibal, emphasizing the correct stance once more. Hannibal took the gun, his smirk persisting. "I assure you, Will, my focus is entirely on the task at hand."

Will rolled his eyes. "Stop bein' a smartass and get it right."

"Now, Hannibal," Will drawled, the Colt firmly in Hannibal's grip, "you gotta get this right. Ain't nothin' fancy 'bout it, just aim straight and true."

Hannibal's eyes met Will's, a playful glint dancing in their depths. He lifted the Colt, but Will could tell by the way he held it that Hannibal was purposefully misaligning the aim.

"I cannot seem to get it right, Sheriff," Hannibal said, his voice dripping with feigned innocence.

Will frowned, a suspicion growing in his mind. He swiftly moved behind Hannibal, his boots softly thudding against the dirt. With deliberate slowness, he wrapped his hands around Hannibal's, relishing in the shiver that passed through the man.

"Now, you listen close, Hannibal," Will murmured, his breath brushing against Hannibal's ear. "You gotta feel it in your bones. This ain't just about pointin' and shootin', it's about connectin' with the damn gun."

Hannibal's body tensed under Will's touch, and he let out a light gasp as Will nipped at the skin beneath his ear. Will smirked, the elation of having control over Hannibal coursing through him.

"Focus, Hannibal," Will urged, guiding Hannibal's arms into the correct position. "You're holdin' power in your hands, and you gotta wield it right."

Hannibal's eyelashes fluttered, and he met Will's gaze with a mix of challenge and submission. Will kicked at Hannibal's legs with his boots, positioning them correctly.

"There we go," Will muttered, his voice low and tinged with desire. "Now, let's try this again. You're gonna get it right this time, you hear?"

Will's Southern drawl lingered in the quiet prairie air as he stood behind Hannibal, their bodies close enough that he could feel the warmth radiating from the man in his grasp. Hannibal was a canvas for Will to paint on, a masterpiece that he could mold and shape as he pleased. In this moment, Will felt like the untamed wind, blowing free across the vast expanse of the West, carrying with it the scent of gun smoke and the promise of danger.

"Hannibal," Will drawled with a smirk, "ya gotta learn to follow instructions. Can't be wavin' that gun around all wild-like."

Hannibal's glare was met with a devilish grin from Will. He called him a cruel boy, and Will chuckled, feeling the weight of the Colt in his hand.

"Ain't about bein' cruel, just about bein' in control," Will replied, a hint of mischief in his eyes. "Now, listen closely. I ain't said you could lower that gun."

Hannibal closed his eyes momentarily, composing himself, before raising the gun once more. Will took a moment to appreciate the sight before him—Hannibal, muscles straining against his shirt, the sheen of sweat giving his skin an alluring glow. It was a mesmerizing view, and Will was savoring every detail.

With a practiced ease, Will retrieved the Colt from Hannibal's hand. Their fingers brushed, sending a pleasurable shiver down Will's spine. He used the opportunity to pull on Hannibal's collar, drawing their faces close, and kissed him fiercely. The impact was so intense their hats bumped together, but Will didn't mind.

"Good job, Hannibal," Will murmured against Hannibal's lips. "Real good."

Hannibal's shudder was a melody to Will's ears. "You are driving me mad, Will."

The small, dusty general store held a treasure trove of objects that caught Will's eye. He moved through the room, fingers grazing over bottles and tools, picking up things he deemed useful. His attention, however, kept drifting back to Hannibal, seated on the floor with that damn book in his hands. Will had half a mind to put that book to better use or throw it into the nearest fire, but the serene smile on Hannibal's face held him back.

As Will examined a small wooden trinket, Hannibal's humming interrupted the quiet rustling of the store. Will's ears perked up at the sound, and he turned to regard Hannibal, who was now reading aloud from the book.

"What is the world to our hearts without love?" Hannibal's voice flowed smoothly, and Will found himself pausing to listen. "What is a magic-lantern without light? You have but to kindle the flame within, and the brightest figures shine on the white wall; and, if love only show us fleeting shadows, we are yet happy, when, like mere children, we behold them, and are transported with the splendid phantoms."

Hannibal rose gracefully from his crouched position, the languid movements akin to a big cat stalking its prey. Will's eyes followed Hannibal's every step, an unnerving awareness settling over him. The man's approach felt like a slow unraveling of defenses, leaving Will exposed and uncomfortably soft.

As Hannibal came to a stop in front of him, hands poised at his sides, the realization of his own vulnerability struck Will like a blow. He felt like a rotten dog, caught in the act of some shameful transgression, unable to avert his eyes from the stern gaze of its master.

"Do you know what love feels like, Will?" Hannibal's voice, a low purr, cut through the charged silence. Will shook his head, a slight tremor in the motion. "Don't think so," he muttered, the words tasting like a lie on his tongue.

Hannibal's gaze, unwavering, held Will captive. The man before him, so beautifully alive, radiated a quiet intensity that left Will shivering. Hannibal's veins pulsed with life, and Will couldn't shake the mad craving, the primal urge, to drink from those veins like a man discovering the fountain of youth.

A tentative touch, Will's fingers tracing the veins on Hannibal's hand, brought a strange intimacy that lingered in the air like a ghost. Hannibal allowed the touch, his expression inscrutable as he watched Will explore the map of veins on his skin.

"I remember stories of love when I was a kid," Will confessed, his voice a whisper that hung in the charged atmosphere. "Fairy tales of princes rescuin' princesses, and they lived happily ever after." He let out a humorless laugh, the bitter taste of reality staining the memory.

Hannibal hummed in response, prompting Will to continue. "I ain't a princess or a prince. There's no happy endings for men like me."

Hannibal lifted Will's hand to his mouth, and with a softness that seemed incongruous with the harsh world outside, he pressed a kiss to Will's knuckles. The gesture sent a shiver down Will's spine, and the flowers of an unfamiliar emotion blossomed in his chest.

"How do you know?" Hannibal's question, muffled against Will's hand, hung in the air. Will shrugged, a gesture that felt inadequate for the weight of the unspoken truth. "I just do," he muttered, his eyes locked with Hannibal's.

A smile, enigmatic and haunting, played on Hannibal's lips. "You are quite a pessimist, Will," he remarked, the words a soft caress.

Will scoffed, a sound laced with both bitterness and a hint of amusement. "And you're just plain crazy."

Hannibal's hum echoed in the room, a subtle agreement. "Perhaps I am," he conceded, his gaze never wavering.

Will's eyes were fixed on Hannibal, his gaze an unyielding force that stripped away the layers of pretense. Hannibal's hat lay abandoned, revealing his forehead adorned with disheveled bangs that spilled over his eyes.

Will's focus narrowed, tracing the elegant curve of Hannibal's lips and studying the long, pale lashes that framed his eyes like delicate curtains. There was a primal yearning within Will, a desire that echoed in the untamed depths of his being. He wanted Hannibal in a way that transcended the boundaries of civility, a craving fierce and unbridled.

He knew the taste of that desire—the rough and passionate pull that urged him to claim Hannibal, to meld with him in a dance as old as time. It was a desire laced with teeth, a hunger that mirrored the untamed instincts of the wilderness that surrounded them.

Yet, as he stared at Hannibal, something unexpected crept over him like a stealthy predator. A different kind of longing, one that was chaste and innocent, blossomed within him. The simple sight of Hannibal's skin, the glimpse of his bare form, sent tremors through Will's core. It was a desire that defied the ferocity of their earlier passion, a tender ache that he hadn't anticipated.

He bit down on his lip, a physical manifestation of the internal struggle that raged within him. The realization hit him like a sudden storm—a storm that swept away the certainties he thought he had. Whether Hannibal approached him as an executioner, a harbinger of doom, or as a lover, Will found himself ready to receive him.

It was a revelation that left him vulnerable, exposed to the whims of emotions he had long kept at bay. The dichotomy of his desires, the rough and the innocent, clashed within him like opposing currents. Yet, in that moment, he couldn't deny the truth that had etched itself into the fabric of his being.

Will, driven by a force he couldn't fully comprehend, pulled Hannibal into a soft, lingering kiss. Their lips barely brushed, and the touch sent a shiver down Will's spine. He was unaccustomed to this type of affection, this juvenile feeling of giddiness that surged through him with each tender connection of their mouths.

As their lips parted, Will could feel the warmth of Hannibal's breath mingling with his own. Will's tongue snaked forward to mingle with Hannibal's. The taste of Hannibal was

intoxicating, a heady blend that left Will craving for more.

Hannibal's hands, skilled and purposeful, moved up to Will's shirt. He murmured words that seemed to dance in the air like delicate notes of a melody. "You are beautiful, Will," Hannibal breathed against his lips, and Will felt a strange flutter in his chest. The words echoed in the silence, and for a moment, Will questioned the sincerity behind them.

The shirt was slipped off, revealing the rough expanse of Will's sun-kissed skin, covered in scars earned from a life lived on the fringes of civilization. It was a canvas marked by the harshness of the frontier, a testament to the battles Will had fought and the survival he had earned.

Hannibal's kisses traced a path down the plane of Will's skin, a slow descent that bordered on worship. He murmured words that seemed too kind, too reverent for the battered exterior that Will wore. Confusion furrowed Will's brow, and he couldn't help but frown at the conflicting emotions stirring within him.

Hannibal's lips moved against Will's skin, soft and deliberate. "Exquisite," he whispered, and the weight of the sentiment hung in the air. Will raised his hands, roughened by calluses, and slid them into Hannibal's hair. The strands felt like silk between his fingers.

A low, guttural chuckle escaped Will's throat. "Beautiful and exquisite, Hannibal?" he mused, his thick Southern accent lingering in the air like a familiar tune. "This skin of mine's seen more dust and blood than anythin'. Hardly a thing worth admirin'."

Hannibal's gaze, unwavering and intense, met Will's eyes. "To me, you are perfection," he replied, his voice carrying a sincerity that struck a chord deep within Will.

The room seemed to narrow down to the space between them—a space where the scars and imperfections painted a story of resilience. Will's gaze softened, and he couldn't shake the strange feeling that wrapped around him like a fragile cocoon.

Will's breath caught in his throat as Hannibal murmured the invitation for him to lie down. The air in the room seemed to thicken, and Will hesitated for a fleeting moment. It struck him

—the realization of how rough he had been with Hannibal the first time, an instinctive response to the wildness that lurked within him. Now, as he considered the prospect of lying back and allowing someone so close, the familiarity of control, of command, gnawed at the edges of his consciousness.

Will knew order, rules, the structured chaos of the wild frontier. But the intimacy, the give and take that existed within the confines of this moment, eluded him. The vulnerability of surrender, of letting someone have free rein over his body, clashed with the rugged autonomy he had always known. Yet, the desire that surged within him, the longing that echoed in his veins, overpowered the fear that whispered at the edges of his mind.

Swallowing the trepidation, Will felt Hannibal's gentle hands cup his face. The touch, tender and reassuring, eased the tightness in Will's chest. "It is alright," Hannibal murmured, a soft reassurance that unfurled the knots within Will's being. The man who had faced the harshness of the world, who had known the brutality of survival, suddenly felt a softness that made him question the very fabric of his identity.

Hannibal, seemingly attuned to the conflict within Will, reached up and carefully removed Will's hat. The action, mundane as it was, carried a weight of significance. Will looked up with wide eyes, and for a moment, the veneer of the hardened cowboy melted away. He felt, inexplicably, like a child once more—a child untainted by the harsh realities of the world, a child whose heart still held the innocence that time had eroded from his adult self.

Hannibal's fingers, the same fingers that had plunged a knife into a hand only hours ago, now touched Will tentatively. The sensation, both innocent and intimate, sent shivers through Will's frame. He guided them down onto the floor slowly, the world narrowing down to the space they occupied—the dusty room, the faded wooden floor, and the quiet cadence of their breaths.

Will, a man nearing his forties but suddenly feeling like he had shed the weight of years, felt an unfamiliar innocence and shyness settle over him. The touch of Hannibal's fingers, the slow descent to the floor, seemed to unravel the layers of a man who had killed and fought, who had seen the world through eyes that had witnessed more death than the fingers on his hands could count.

The warmth of Hannibal's touch, the quiet assurance in his eyes, made Will feel like his heart had died and been remade in Hannibal's hands like clay.

Will shuddered as Hannibal crawled over him, strong arms caging him beside his head. The air between them held a different tension—a tension not laced with the threat of danger or a knife pressed against anyone's throat. In that moment, Hannibal was not a threat; he was something else entirely.

Will's fingers curled into Hannibal's shirt, and he guided him down for a kiss. The touch was soft, a stark departure from the hard and rough desire that pulsed within him. This was new territory for Will—a peaceful encounter in the midst of chaos, a moment that carried both the thrill of the unknown and the comfort of bliss.

Hannibal's shirt yielded to Will's nimble fingers as he unbuttoned it, revealing a strong frame that held both the elegance of refined civilization and the ruggedness of a life lived in the unforgiving wild. Will's breath hitched, and a gasp escaped his lips as his fingers traced over Hannibal's chest.

Hannibal's smile, a subtle acknowledgment of the effect he had on Will, sent shivers down Will's frame. The soft caress of Hannibal's lips continued, exploring Will's chest, stomach, and the ribs that protruded due to the scarcity of nourishment. A pang of self-consciousness struck Will, a reminder of the toll the harsh frontier had taken on his body.

Hannibal's lips traveled over Will's scars, each touch an intimate exploration of the marks that told stories of survival. Will, unable to contain the surge of emotions, looked up to the ceiling as if seeking answers from a higher power. Why, he wondered, was God toying with him like this? In a world that had lost its moral compass, where survival often came at the cost of one's humanity, the sudden intrusion of tenderness felt like a joke.

Hannibal's hand gently guided Will's face down, a subtle command that held the unspoken weight of a plea—don't leave. Will, looking into Hannibal's eyes, echoed the sentiment in a simple question, "Where else would I go?"

Another kiss, a shared moment of communion, passed between them before Hannibal resumed his trail of exploration over Will's scars. Will shivered at the sensation, the touch of Hannibal's fingers tracing the white and red, bumpy lines that told tales of battles fought and wounds endured. The touch invoked memories, emotions that Will had long buried beneath the layers of survival instinct.

Hannibal's voice, a soothing cadence, broke through the silence. "How did you get this one?" he inquired, his fingers lingering over a scar on Will's stomach. The question opened a door to a past that Will had learned to keep locked away, a past that threatened to flood him with emotions he was not ready to confront.

Will shook his head, a silent plea for Hannibal to let it rest. "Can't," he murmured, the weight of unspoken memories heavy in his gaze. The harsh realities of his life, the sins he had committed and the wounds he had endured, were not subjects Will wished to delve into. To confront those memories meant risking the fragile sanctuary they had built.

Hannibal, sensing the hesitation, took Will's hand and guided it to a small pink line on his own collarbone. "This one," Hannibal began, "I got from fighting off a feral cat that was trying to get Mischa."

A shaky laugh escaped Will's lips as he imagined the absurdity of a feral cat challenging Hannibal. "Did the cat win?" he asked, a wry smile playing on his face. Hannibal's response was a smile that held a hint of amusement. "The cat ran away, hissing and entirely angry," he recounted.

Will, filled with a strange adoration for this man who had become a thread woven into the fabric of his existence, reached up to capture Hannibal's lips in a kiss. Will felt an odd sensation, like a string tightly knotted in his ribs, mirroring a similar string in Hannibal's ribs.

The thought of Hannibal leaving, severing that invisible cord of communion, sent a chill down Will's spine. He envisioned a rupture, the snapping of the bond that connected them, causing him to bleed internally.

Will gently guided Hannibal's hand back down to the scar on his stomach, a silent invitation to explore the narratives etched into his skin. He whispered, his voice a low drawl carrying the weight of memories, "Got that one from a knife in a particularly bad fight. Attacked me half asleep."

Hannibal, a wry smile playing on his lips, huffed a laugh and pressed a kiss to the scar. "I imagine the man who attacked you fared far worse," he remarked.

Will nodded, a smile playing on his lips as he recalled the details of that encounter. "Yeah," Will replied, "he didn't walk away with a souvenir."

Hannibal, teasing in his manner, remarked, "You are oh so prickly in the morning, aren't you?" The comment drew a playful smirk from Will, a recognition of the truth behind the jest.

Will traversed the expanse of Hannibal's shoulders. He reveled in the sensation, the touch of skin beneath his fingertips, and let his eyelashes flutter in a moment of sheer surrender. The desire for Hannibal's touch surged within him, a mad longing that threatened to consume him whole.

In this vulnerable position, skin bared and heart laid bare, Will felt the pull of submission to the wolf atop him. The prospect of surrendering, of offering his heart on a platter, no longer held the sting of fear it once did.

Rising to kiss Hannibal, Will asked a question that held the weight of surrender and trust. "Touch me," he asked, the words a quiet plea that echoed in the quiet confines of the room. As the request hung in the air, Will grappled with the implications of what he was allowing. If he permitted Hannibal to touch him in this intimate way, what else would he allow? The answer, unspoken yet palpable, lingered between them: Anything. Anything at all.

Hannibal's voice, smooth as aged wine, brushed against Will's ears. “Sweet boy.”

A shudder coursed through Will's frame. He knew the incongruity of the term – sweet and boy. He was neither sweet nor a boy, not in the conventional sense. But in this moment, under the moonlit canvas of the night, he longed to be just that for Hannibal. Sweet, tender, and ripe for Hannibal's taking.

As Hannibal's hands roamed down Will's form, tracing the contours of his body, they reached Will’s concealed hardness and the promise it held.

Will tremored as Hannibal's hands approached the bulge tenting his pants. A gentle shush escaped Hannibal's lips, a command to quiet the quivering anticipation. Hannibal's fingers delved into Will’s pants, touching Will – the essence of Will himself. The warmth of Hannibal's palm against his skin sent violent shivers down Will's spine.

As Hannibal's hand explored, Will's own hand sought refuge on Hannibal's muscled arm. His fingers traced the movement of Hannibal's muscles, a tactile affirmation of the intimacy they were creating. Will moaned, a low, guttural sound, as Hannibal intensified his touch, fingers stroking his cock with a delicate yet fervent passion

Will's hand, guided by desire, reached for Hannibal, his rough palm wrapping around Hannibal’s cock. Their hands moved in tandem.

As they stroked each other, a shared rhythm emerged, their bodies writhing in unison. Moans of pleasure and soft gasps punctuated the silence of the night, creating an illicit melody. Lips brushed against each other, a desperate connection as if they drew breath from each other's lungs.

Wolves and lambs cannot be of one mind, yet here they were.

Will's chest heaved with a mixture of emotions, the intensity of which left him struggling to articulate his thoughts. He felt an overwhelming surge of gratitude, an acknowledgment that this moment, shared with Hannibal, transcended the boundaries of mere physical intimacy. He stammered, lips parting as he attempted to find the right words, but they eluded him.

Hannibal, attuned to the intricate nuances of Will's emotions, nuzzled against his nose, a tender gesture that spoke volumes. "I know," Hannibal murmured, his voice a soothing balm to Will's turbulent thoughts. In that moment, with Hannibal's understanding, Will's grip tightened, the act both grounding and reassuring. He trembled in the embrace, a whirlwind of emotions threatening to pull him under.

Italian endearments spilled from Hannibal's lips, adding a layer of intimacy to the already charged atmosphere. Will surrendered to the waves of bliss, his senses consumed by the melding of their beings.

As Hannibal kissed him, Will felt the final pulse of his cock in Hannibal's hand. Pleasure surged through him, and he sighed, the sound carrying the weight of ecstasy. Hannibal bit gently at Will's neck, a sensation that elicited a reciprocal response. Wetness spurted into Will's own palm, a shared climax that left him languid and sated.

Will, cradled in Hannibal's arms, felt a strange tranquility settle over him.

Will's blue eyes, glinting like the vast sky above, fluttered as he leaned his head over Hannibal's chest. The steady rhythm of Hannibal's heartbeat resonated through him—an unexpected symphony that tugged at the frayed edges of his solitude. How long had it been since he'd been close enough to another soul to hear the reassuring thud of a heart? Too long, he mused.

In this moment, he realized that touch wasn't only about bites and snarls, about marking territories and staking claims. It was something more, something that reached beyond the primal urges and spoke to the silent, tender desires buried deep within. Will, the lone wolf of the frontier, found himself tamed, if only for a fleeting moment, in the arms of the devil.

With a gentle touch, Will dared to ask a question that lingered in the quiet space between them, "Do you care for me, Hannibal?" His thick Southern accent drawled the words out, each syllable like the unhurried gait of a weary cowboy.

Hannibal pressed a kiss to the top of Will's head, a tender gesture that seemed incongruous with the man who had carved a path through the wild with a calculated ferocity. "My compassion for you is inconvenient, Will," Hannibal confessed. "But make no mistake, I know to the deepest marrows of my bones that I care for you."

Will's grip tightened on Hannibal, as if holding onto the assurance he desperately sought. "Why?" Will questioned, his voice a low murmur against Hannibal's chest.

Hannibal's response was a declaration that cut through the quiet like a whispering breeze. "My body, my blood, my soul—everything that I am is yours, Will."

It was a revelation that left Will grappling with the weight of Hannibal's words. He shifted, looking up to meet Hannibal's eyes, his own gaze a storm of conflicting emotions. "I've seen you, Hannibal," Will confessed, the admission hanging in the air like the scent of rain before a storm.

Hannibal's fingers traced the contours of Will's face, a gentle caress that mirrored the tenderness Will was just beginning to understand. "You are the angel of my life, Will," Hannibal whispered, his words weaving into the fabric of the moment.

The admission stirred something within Will, a mixture of fear and desire that he couldn't quite grasp. He confessed, "I'm scared, Hannibal. Scared of these feelings, scared they'll ruin me. And I’m scared I just might let them.”

Hannibal's gaze held an intensity that bore into Will's soul. "The world is already in ruins, Will," he responded, his voice carrying the weight of centuries. "We do not have to be."

In that moment, the distinction between predator and prey, between the devil and the fallen, blurred. Will's heart raced as he leaned in, capturing Hannibal's lips in a kiss that was both a declaration and a plea. The world outside, with its dust and danger, melted away, leaving only the two of them in a bubble of shared desire.

As their lips parted, Will felt a yearning like never before. His heart, a snaking vine of emotions, entwined itself with the primal longing for Hannibal. "I want more," Will admitted, his voice a rough drawl that echoed through the room like the wind sweeping across the plains.

Hannibal's eyes met Will's, a shared understanding passing between them. Will's fingers tangled in Hannibal's hair, a connection like flower roots sinking into fertile soil. "I want all of you," Will declared, the admission laced with a raw honesty he seldom allowed himself to express.

Will lay sprawled across Hannibal's chest, fingers tracing aimless patterns in the chest hair beneath them. The warmth of Hannibal's skin beneath his touch was a comfort that seeped into Will's bones, rendering him peacefully warm and on the brink of slumber.

Hannibal reciprocated the tender touch, his fingers tracing slow circles on Will's back, a touch that spoke of both familiarity and a desire to etch his presence onto the canvas of Will's being. As Hannibal's fingers moved, Will found himself yearning for those gentle caresses to linger on the nobs of his spine, leaving an indelible mark of connection.

The corners of Hannibal's lips curved into a serene smile, and he spoke with a softness that matched the quietude of the room. "You are like a sleepy child, Will."

Will scowled playfully, nuzzling closer to Hannibal's chest. "I'm a grown man," he muttered, the words muffled against the warmth of Hannibal's skin.

Hannibal hummed in response, a noncommittal sound that only fueled Will's mock annoyance. Yet, despite the banter, Will made no move to disentangle himself from the comforting embrace.

A sigh escaped Will's lips, the air heavy with a sense of peace. Hannibal, sensing the shift in the atmosphere, gently prodded, "What happened to your father, Will?"

The question hung in the air like a specter, a ghost from the depths of Will's past that he had long tried to bury. He hesitated, fingers stilling in their tracing, and a distant look clouded his blue eyes.

"I ain't talked about it since it happened," Will admitted, his drawl thickening with the weight of the memories he had kept locked away. "Sent it deep into the darkest parts of myself. Forced myself not to think about it."

Hannibal's gaze, unwavering and filled with a quiet understanding, encouraged Will to open up. "But here you are, love-me eyes and all," Will remarked, a faint smirk playing on his lips.

Hannibal chuckled, a deep sound that reverberated through his chest. "Love-me eyes? Is that what you see, Will?"

Will rolled his eyes, but the corners of his lips betrayed a hint of amusement. "You know what I mean, Hannibal."

The silence lingered, an unspoken invitation for Will to share the burden that had weighed on his shoulders for far too long. With a deep breath, he began, "We were travelin', my father and me. Just tryin' to survive. Got attacked by walkers, out of nowhere."

His fingers tightened on Hannibal's chest, the memory surfacing. "I tried my best to help him, but I was just a skinny kid. Dad told me to run, not to look back. I ran, Hannibal. And all I heard was damn screamin'. Never saw what happened to him as I ran."

Hannibal's lips pressed against the top of Will's head, a gentle kiss that spoke volumes. The gesture, a silent acknowledgment of the pain Will had carried for so long, felt like a balm on an old wound.

"I've been alone ever since," Will confessed, the weight of the admission hanging in the air like a heavy mist.

Hannibal's voice, a soothing cadence that wrapped around Will like a comforting embrace, broke the quietude. "Thank you for telling me, Will."

Will lay nestled against Hannibal's chest, the steady rise and fall beneath him a rhythm that resonated with the quietude of the night. The warmth enveloping him, both from the room and Hannibal's embrace, made him feel like a piece of meat—tender, bleeding, and strangely content.

Hannibal, his fingers trailing aimlessly on Will's back, broke the silence with a revelation that echoed through the room like a haunting melody. "Mischa and I were attacked when the outbreak first happened," Hannibal began, his voice carrying the weight of a past shrouded in darkness. "Men killed our parents, and trapped us in our home for days during the winter."

Will tensed at the words, the implications of those chilling days etched in the lines of Hannibal's expression. He lifted his head, locking eyes with Hannibal. The misty beauty of Hannibal's gaze held a sadness that touched a chord deep within Will.

Hannibal continued, his voice measured and filled with a haunted resonance. "We ran out of food. We were snowed in, and we could not get out. And the men... they had gotten hungry."

Will's fingers cupped Hannibal's face gently. The unspoken understanding passed between them, and Will kissed Hannibal's forehead with a tenderness that held the weight of shared pain. "I'm sorry, darlin'," Will murmured.

The question hung in the air, heavy with anticipation. "What happened to the men?" Will asked, his voice a soft drawl.

Hannibal hummed, the sound carrying the echoes of a tale steeped in blood. "I killed them all."

A smile curled on Will's lips, a mixture of admiration and acceptance. "My monster," he whispered.

As he dropped back onto Hannibal's chest, the warmth enveloped him once more, cocooning him in a sense of security that defied the harsh reality outside. The moonlit room, the faded wooden floor, and the quiet cadence of their breaths seemed to exist in a world of their own.

Hannibal's voice, a soothing melody, cut through the stillness. "Sleep, Will."

The awareness of time tugged at the edges of Will's consciousness. They had been here for hours, and the urgency of their journey loomed over them. Yet, in Hannibal's embrace, Will felt an irresistible pull—a longing that overshadowed the need for haste.

He murmured, the words a quiet surrender to the temptation that bound them, "Mon ange, we should get goin'."

Hannibal's fingers traced gentle patterns on Will's back, a lullaby that beckoned him into the arms of slumber. "Sleep, mylimasis," Hannibal repeated, his voice a soft command.

The outside world, with its dangers and uncertainties, faded into the background. Will felt the pull of exhaustion, the weight of his eyelids becoming too heavy to resist. In the tender embrace of the devil, surrounded by the haunting echoes of their shared pasts, Will surrendered to the warm currents of sleep.

Chapter End Notes

The chapter count will probably go up a bit since my pacing is way slower than I expected, I hope that’s okay with you guys! <3

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The serenity of slumber was shattered by the haunting sounds of wailing and groans, an ominous chorus that echoed through the air like a ghostly lament. Will's eyes snapped open, the world still blurry with remnants of dreams and warmth. In a hasty response, he buried his head into the solid, warm flesh beneath him, an instinctual seeking of refuge.

"Shut the hell up!" he barked, the harshness of his command cutting through the morning air before he fully grasped the source of the disturbance. Damn walkers. Damn them all to hell. A man can't even enjoy a quiet morning without them meddling in his peace. Will cursed under his breath, feeling the tremors of annoyance coursing through him like wildfire.

Suddenly aware of the irony of his outburst—given that it was the dead who didn't know the meaning of peace—Will shot up, his movements abrupt. His hand smacked Hannibal's chest in the process, a not-so-gentle reminder of the urgency that roused them from their shared cocoon.

"Get up!" Will hissed, the words bitten off with frustration. The blankets of sleep still clung to him like a stubborn fog, but the harsh reality of their world demanded immediate attention.

Hannibal stirred beneath him, stretching languidly like a cat awakening from a nap. The casual grace of his movements irked Will, who felt a surge of impatience at the nonchalant response. "There is no reason to whisper now that you've told them to be quiet," Hannibal remarked, his voice a velvety purr.

Will scowled, the lines on his forehead deepening as he shot a glare at Hannibal. He grabbed their shirts from the ground, roughly throwing Hannibal's toward him. Hannibal, ever composed, met Will's scowl with a calm gaze. "Panicking will not change our situation, Will," he said, a serene smile playing on his lips.

Will shot him a glare that could cut through steel. "I ain't panickin'," he retorted, though the edge in his voice betrayed the lie. "I just don't appreciate bein' woken up by those rottin' bastards."

Hannibal regarded Will with a calm demeanor, seemingly unaffected by the chaos that lurked beyond the walls of their sanctuary. "The morning sun beckons, Will," Hannibal said, the words carrying a poetic elegance that grated on Will's nerves.

"Don't give me that nonsense," Will retorted, buttoning up his shirt with brisk motions. The noise outside intensified, the wailing and groans weaving together into a symphony of dread. Will ran a hand through his disheveled hair, feeling the weight of exhaustion settling over him like a second skin.

The creaking of the door to the general store echoed in the tense silence of the room. Will stilled, his senses heightened as he strained to discern the subtle sounds that followed. The floorboards betrayed the presence of an intruder, the guttural moans signaling the unmistakable approach of walkers.

Him and Hannibal were concealed behind a shelf but the precariousness of their situation pressed down on Will like a lead weight. A single noise could shatter the fragile veil of invisibility they clung to, exposing them to the relentless threat outside.

Will's fingers curled around the grip of his Bowie knife, the cool metal offering a familiar reassurance in the face of danger. He exchanged a fleeting glance with Hannibal. The stakes were high, and any misstep could spell their doom.

The advantage, however, rested in the walkers' shortcomings. Their senses were feeble, drawn primarily to the scent of blood. Will, with a touch of wry gratitude, acknowledged his luck in this regard. It allowed him to navigate the perilous landscape with a certain degree of impunity, relying on stealth rather than brute force.

A realization crossed Will's mind—an acknowledgment of another stroke of fortune. The walkers, in their insatiable hunger, showed no interest in animals. Their horses grazed outside the store, seemingly invisible to the undead menace.

Will's thoughts drifted to the first time he discovered this peculiar aspect of the walkers' behavior. His horse stood nonchalantly in front of a walker as if the animated corpse were a long-lost friend.

He had cursed at his horse, his frustration evident in the sharpness of his tone. Damn animal, couldn't it sense the danger? Yet, as the walker shuffled toward him, Will realized the peculiar blessing hidden within this anomaly. Walkers, for reasons unknown, spared animals from their relentless attacks.

The revelation had spared his horse's life, a creature indispensable to Will's survival. He had almost cut the walker's head off in frustration, the blade of his Bowie slicing through the air with a practiced precision born of necessity. In that moment, he couldn't deny the unspoken gratitude he felt toward the oblivious equine.

The memory, now etched in the fabric of his survival, flashed through Will's mind as the present danger loomed. He shifted his focus back to the situation at hand, the urgency pressing on him like the unforgiving heat of the midday sun.

The moans of the walkers grew louder, the sound reverberating through the stale air of the general store. Will took a slow, steadying breath, his senses attuned to every subtle movement around him. The shelf provided a slender shield against the imminent threat, but Will knew that their fate hung in the balance.

Will turned his head slowly, his gaze piercing through the room, and was met with an excited grin from Hannibal. The man lay there, shirt haphazardly draped across his muscled form like some type of biblical painting, and Will felt a surge of frustration. Hannibal, infuriatingly tempting, had a way of pushing Will's resolve to its limits.

In the midst of the looming threat of walkers, Hannibal remained a distraction that Will couldn't afford. The infuriating charm of the man, his devilish grin and the allure that seemed to radiate from him, left Will grappling with emotions he wished he could banish.

Will hated the fact that he couldn't hate Hannibal, no matter how hard he tried. The man was a puzzle, a maddening enigma that defied Will's attempts to categorize him as an adversary. Instead, Hannibal existed as a constant presence, a source of both fascination and exasperation.

Slowly, Will pulled out his Bowie knife, the cold steel glinting in the dim light. He gripped it tightly, the familiarity of the weapon offering a semblance of comfort. The walker was getting closer, its twitching and wheezing growing more audible with each passing moment.

Will's frown deepened as he heard another floorboard creak, the unsettling sound accompanied by a second set of wheezing. There were two of them. Just his damn luck. The harsh reality of their predicament pressed down on Will, and he closed his eyes briefly, mentally preparing for the impending confrontation.

The urgency of the situation heightened, and Will knew he had no time for distractions. Yet, Hannibal remained on the floor, a potential liability in a dance with the undead.

Will cast a glance back at Hannibal, frustration etched across his features, and made a series of gestures. Two fingers pointed forward, a silent signal for them to move in that direction. Yet, to Will's chagrin, Hannibal only tilted his head with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

"Damn it," Will mouthed, his lips forming the words soundlessly. He gestured again, more urgently this time, mouthing a threat that he was going to 'fuckin' kill' Hannibal. In response, Hannibal's smile widened, revealing all his teeth. The man seemed to revel in the chaos, a predator at play in the midst of danger.

Will needed a plan, and he needed it fast. He surveyed their surroundings, assessing the paths available to them. One option involved stepping around the shelf, coming face-to-face with the restless walkers. The incessant wailing grated on Will's nerves, intensifying the urgency of the situation.

Taking a quiet breath, Will steeled himself for the task at hand. The plan was simple: step around quietly and dispatch the walkers without drawing unnecessary attention. He lowered his gaze, his eyes scanning the area for potential hazards. The spurs on his boots, an unfortunate accessory in the realm of stealth, suddenly seemed far too loud.

Will bit his lip, frustration evident in the furrow of his brow. He shot a scowl at Hannibal, a silent reproach for the gleeful chaos that seemed to follow the man like a shadow. With careful deliberation, Will began to execute his plan.

The first step, a mere shift of his weight as he moved his left boot over his right, felt like an eternity. The walkers continued their aimless shuffle, their moans blending into an eerie symphony that echoed through the space. Will's heart quickened, the adrenaline coursing through his veins.

His left foot lifted, freed from the clutches of its companion, and Will felt a twinge of relief. The ordeal, however, was far from over. He needed to repeat the process with his other boot.

Carefully, Will placed his socked foot on the floor, using it for support as he stepped out of his remaining boot. Each movement was deliberate, every second measured.

With a muted exhale, Will successfully freed his second foot from its leather confines.

Will turned his gaze back to Hannibal to find the man standing—shirtless, boots discarded. Will couldn't fathom how Hannibal managed such swift and silent movements. The man seemed to possess a serpentine grace, moving with a fluidity that defied the laws of the frontier.

As Hannibal scanned their surroundings, his eyes lit up with an excitement that seemed out of place in the face of imminent danger. Will watched, his scowl deepening, as Hannibal's attention settled on a makeshift weapon—a screwdriver. The wooden handle met the confident curl of Hannibal's long fingers, and a smug smirk played on his lips. Will's frustration simmered beneath the surface, his desire to kiss away that smugness conflicting with the pressing need for silence.

Their moment of preparation was abruptly interrupted by a loud wail just outside the shelf. Will shot a glare in the direction of the sound, irritation etched across his features. The walkers, oblivious to the pair concealed behind the shelves, continued their aimless wanderings.

In an attempt to communicate their strategy, Will gestured with his hands, silently mouthing words to explain their next move. Hannibal observed him with a strange fascination, as if Will were some peculiar creature deserving of scrutiny. Undeterred, Will continued with animated explanations, making stabbing motions and pointing at his eye to emphasize their plan.

With the final flourish of his pantomime, Will signaled that, on the count of ten, they would peek around the shelf and launch their attack. He waited for Hannibal's response, the silence between them thick with the weight of impending danger.

Hannibal, still holding the screwdriver with an air of nonchalant confidence, nodded politely. Relief washed over Will as he released a held breath.

The count began, fingers raised in a silent cadence—one, two, three, four... Will's nerves tightened, the anticipation building in the quiet between each number. But before Will could reach ten, horror seized him as Hannibal, seemingly oblivious to the plan, stepped around the shelf with his screwdriver in hand. A curse slipped past Will's lips, and he berated Hannibal, calling him every conceivable epithet for a reckless idiot bastard.

Will hurriedly moved to see what havoc Hannibal had wrought, his apprehension mounting. There, before him, Hannibal had engaged one of the walkers, screwdriver plunged into its eye. The abomination wailed in agony, twitching violently in Hannibal's grasp as he persisted in digging the tool harshly into its skull.

The second walker, its eyes practically leaking out of its skull, lunged at Will with an unnatural fervor. The ghastly creature, its skin hanging off its bones like melting wax, was a macabre sight. Will's instincts kicked in, and with a sidestep that left him mere inches from the oncoming attack, he narrowly avoided the creature's grasp.

Cursing under his breath, Will deftly moved around the walker, creating distance between them. The creature wailed and twitched, its relentless pursuit fueled by the insatiable hunger that drove the undead. Will's gaze remained locked on the creature as he strategically maneuvered to the far left wall of the general store.

The walker, undeterred by its decaying form, continued its relentless advance. Will, recognizing the imminent threat, tightened his grip on his Bowie knife, preparing for a decisive move.

In one swift, practiced motion, Will raised his knife, taking careful aim at the walker's head. His throw was precise, the blade finding its mark with deadly accuracy. The knife embedded

itself in the creature's eye socket, eliciting a final twitch before the wailing, grotesque figure crumpled to the ground in a lifeless heap.

Hannibal sauntered over to Will, his movements calculated and smooth. He pressed a kiss to Will's temple, the gesture incongruent with the grim surroundings."Very good, Will," Hannibal murmured, his voice a low purr that only fueled Will's frustration. Will scowled instinctively, ready to resist the unsettling allure that Hannibal exuded.

A strong grip on Hannibal's shoulders replaced the intended push away. Will's calloused fingers dug into the fabric of Hannibal's skin even in the face of mutual irritation. "You're a complete son of a bitch," Will muttered, his Southern drawl lacing the words with a particular brand of disdain.

Hannibal, undeterred, leaned away from Will, a smile playing on his lips. His response was a simple inquiry, laced with genuine curiosity. "Did you truly believe I would decipher your wild gesturing?" A raised eyebrow accompanied the question, a testament to the underlying amusement in Hannibal's eyes.

Will's scowl deepened, and the desire to lash out welled up within him. "I want to kill you, Hannibal, real bad," he admitted, the words hanging heavy in the air between them. The tension crackled as Hannibal pressed his lips against Will's. Despite his best efforts, Will found himself responding, the closeness momentarily eclipsing the dangers that lurked beyond.

"It's fine," Will grumbled as they parted, his gaze hardened. "We're not dead. Yet." He shot a pointed look at Hannibal. "But you damn well better listen next time.”

Hannibal nodded in agreement. "I promise, dear Will, I will heed your warnings," he vowed, his tone carrying a sincerity that belied his unsettling charisma.

As Hannibal retrieved his shirt, Will walked over to the fallen walker. He pulled the Bowie knife from its eye, a task performed with practiced efficiency. Wiping the blade clean on the creature's tattered clothes, he sighed, the weariness settling into his bones. "You'll be the damn death of me," Will muttered.

Will followed Hannibal's lead, shoving his boots on hastily. The exchange of their gaze was a battlefield in itself, an unspoken dialogue of frustration and a resignation to the inevitable recklessness that defined Hannibal. As they prepared to face the dangers that lurked beyond the store, Hannibal's concern cut through the tension.

“Are you hurt?" Hannibal inquired, a genuine concern evident in his eyes. Will scowled at the question, the frustration bubbling within him like a simmering pot threatening to boil over.

"No, I ain't hurt," Will snapped, his drawl sharp with irritation. He grimaced, his eyes narrowing at Hannibal. The man was reckless, and Will knew it all too well. There had been too many close calls, moments when their lives hung in the balance due to Hannibal's whims. Will rolled his eyes; there was a bitter acceptance in the acknowledgment that there was nothing he could do to change the nature of the man beside him.

Scowling deeper, Will watched as Hannibal approached, fingers lifting his chin with a gentle touch that belied the man's earlier recklessness. The glint of irritation simmered in Will's gaze as he met Hannibal's probing eyes. Their height difference, subtle but present, added an extra layer to their dynamic, making Hannibal seem like a looming presence that Will simultaneously resisted and yielded to.

"Are you mad?" Hannibal asked, his voice a silk-edged inquiry that had an annoying tendency to soften Will's resolve. Will glared up at him, the lines etched on his face betraying a familiar blend of frustration and attraction.

"Yeah, I'm damn mad," Will retorted, a growl beneath his words. He couldn't help but feel the sting of exasperation; a recurrent theme in their tumultuous companionship. "You need to be more careful, Hannibal. One of these days, your recklessness is gonna get us both killed."

Hannibal's thumb traced a path along Will's jawline, a gesture that carried both tenderness and an air of defiance. "I promised I would listen to you," he reminded, his tone unwavering.

Will scoffed, a bitter expression twisting his features. "Promises ain't worth much if you're lyin’ face down in the dirt," he muttered.

Hannibal's smile, a mixture of amusement and genuine affection, played on his lips. "Worried about my death, Will?" he teased, the words a delicate dance over the tense atmosphere. Will shot him a sharp look before grumbling a begrudging "No."

There was a beat of silence, an unspoken exchange that hung in the air like the fine dust particles caught in sunlight. Then, as if the weight of his unspoken fears became too much, Will's voice rose in the small space. "Yes," he admitted, a gruff admission. "I don't want you dyin’ on me, Hannibal."

Hannibal's reply, a soft declaration wrapped in the cadence of affection, flowed through the air like a soothing melody. "Your hand is the only one that will bring me death, caro mio." The endearment, spoken with the tenderness of an ageless bond, had a way of melting Will's defenses. The warmth that unfurled in his chest felt foreign yet welcomed.

Will could feel the heat rising to his cheeks, a subtle blush that betrayed the emotions he often tried to conceal. He shifted uncomfortably, his scowl softening into something resembling the aftershocks of a thunderstorm. "Don’t act sweet, Hannibal," he mumbled, the words carrying a mix of sarcasm and a reluctant admission.

As memories of the night before crept into Will's mind, a current of warmth replaced the lingering tension. He recalled Hannibal's gentle touch, the way the man had held him as if he were something fragile yet precious.

In a sudden, impulsive gesture, Will leaned in and pecked Hannibal on the cheek. It was a brief, fleeting contact, yet it held a wealth of unspoken sentiments. "You better keep that promise about being careful," Will muttered, the words carrying the weight of unspoken emotions. "I ain't ready to be a widower just yet."

"A widower?" Hannibal's eyebrow arched in an elegant curve, his gaze holding a playful twinkle that mirrored the mischievous gleam in his smile.

Will groaned, a mix of exasperation and embarrassment. "It was just a damn joke, Hannibal," he grumbled, though a begrudging smile tugged at the corners of his lips. He couldn't help but appreciate the way Hannibal's amusement could be as infuriating as it was endearing.

Hannibal's smile, radiant and unapologetic, could rival the sun in its brilliance. Despite the irritation that still lingered beneath the surface, Will found himself admiring it. There was something infectious about Hannibal's joy, even if it came at the expense of Will's patience.

The dry, dusty ground crunched beneath Will's fingers as he traced random shapes in the dirt. His blue eyes were fixed on the ground, his mind lost in the dance of patterns he created. The rhythmic movement of his finger, a simple act of distraction, held a soothing quality that temporarily whisked him away.

A subtle awareness settled over him, a feeling of being watched that lingered in the air like a familiar scent. Will tilted his head, his curls falling into his eyes, as he glanced up. There, beside him, Hannibal sat with an air of nonchalance, seemingly absorbed in the pages of a book.

A grin played on Will's lips. He knew Hannibal's act, the pretense of peaceful reading. The man could feign indifference, could cloak himself in the veneer of serenity, but Will saw through the charade.

Will's fingers sifted through the unruly waves of his overgrown hair, a constant source of annoyance as it obstructed his vision once again. A muttered curse escaped his lips,. He knew it was time for a trim—his hair had grown far too long, a testament to the weeks spent on the trail without proper attention.

The decision to cut it was made swiftly, a familiar routine etched into the fabric of his solitary existence. Will retrieved his knife. He hesitated for a moment, considering the unruly mass of curls before him. Memories of Hannibal's gentle touch, the way his fingers traced through Will's hair stirred within him.

Resolving to cut only a little, Will removed his hat and positioned the knife near his hair. Intent on executing the familiar, choppy method, he flinched as Hannibal scooted up beside him and wrested the knife from his grasp. Will scowled, the interruption disrupting his routine, and demanded an explanation.

"What the hell do you think you're doin'?" Will's voice carried a note of irritation as he eyed Hannibal, who held the knife as if it were a precious artifact.

Hannibal tutted disapprovingly, his eyes fixed on Will's hair. "I will not let you cut off your beautiful curls in such a haphazard manner, Will."

Will scratched his head, a perplexed expression etched across his features. "It's not that damn serious, Hannibal," he retorted, bewildered by Hannibal's vehement reaction.

To Will's surprise, Hannibal's countenance transformed, his expression shifting as though Will had just threatened something far graver than a simple haircut. Sensing the gravity of the situation, Hannibal moved behind him, his presence a reassuring weight.

"Let me do it," Hannibal urged, his voice soft yet insistent. The gentle command held an air of intimacy, as if the act of cutting Will's hair carried a significance beyond the superficial.

Will, still caught off guard by Hannibal's sudden protectiveness over his curls, hesitated. "Why the hell does it matter to you?" he grumbled, a mixture of confusion and curiosity clouding his thoughts.

Hannibal's hands, skilled and purposeful, rested on Will's shoulders, the warmth of his touch seeping through the layers of fabric. "Because," Hannibal began, his tone carrying a weight of sincerity, "there is a certain beauty in the way your curls frame your face. I would not let you diminish that beauty with a careless cut."

The unexpected compliment caught Will off guard, and for a moment, he found himself at a loss for words. The sincerity in Hannibal's gaze, the way he spoke of Will's hair as though it held some intrinsic value, struck a chord within him.

"No damn way," Will declared, his face flushing with a mix of annoyance and embarrassment as Hannibal insisted on handling the task of cutting his hair. He shot a disgruntled look in Hannibal's direction, his frown deepening.

Hannibal responded with an amused smile, undeterred by Will's protest. "Don't pout, Will," he coaxed, his voice low and soothing. Will scoffed in response, the irritation evident in his voice.

"I ain't pouting. Just don't like folks meddlin’ where they ain't needed," he retorted, the volume of his words rising. Hannibal shushed him gently, moving closer to kiss Will, a tactic he knew well. Will resisted at first, lips pressed into a stubborn line, but soon enough, he relented, succumbing to the warmth of Hannibal's kiss.

Hannibal took advantage of the moment, nuzzling his nose against Will's in a display of affection. "Please," he whispered against Will's lips, his eyes pleading. Will rolled his eyes, feigning resistance even as the corners of his mouth twitched.

"You're bein’ ridiculous," Will grumbled, though the defiance in his voice wavered. He met Hannibal's gaze, and there it was—the pleading look that Will found nearly impossible to resist. Groaning, he muttered about the impossibility of having so many colors in one damn eyeball.

Hannibal's smile widened, triumphant, as he kissed the nape of Will's neck. "Thank you," he murmured, a note of satisfaction in his voice. Will grunted in response, his 'whatever' indicating a grudging acceptance.

As Hannibal set to work, running his hands through Will's unruly curls, Will fidgeted. "Stay still," Hannibal admonished gently, his fingers navigating the waves of Will's hair. Will closed his eyes, releasing a sigh as he surrendered to the sensation of Hannibal's touch.

The hands that touched him were surprisingly gentle, as if Will were a delicate creature rather than a rugged man adorned with scars. In the harshness of their surroundings, this tenderness was an anomaly, but one that Will found himself unable to resist. Violence seemed inconsequential in this moment—only Hannibal, the sun, and the quiet expanse of their solitude mattered.

The rhythmic motion of Hannibal's hands became a soothing melody, and Will allowed himself to relax into it. He let go of the tension that had become second nature in their unforgiving world.

Will could feel the weight of his curls diminishing, each strand severed by the careful hand wielding the knife. He focused on gathering pebbles into his hat, the rhythmic clinking offering a counterpoint to the snip of his blade. A sudden urge for conversation overcame him, a desire to drown out the silence with Hannibal's voice.

"Talk," Will requested, the word escaping his lips as a whispered plea.

Hannibal hummed in response, a sound that seemed to resonate with the cadence of the frontier breeze. "What would you like to hear?" he inquired, the measured tempo of his voice a balm to the lingering tension.

Will shrugged. A small sound of disapproval escaped Hannibal's lips. "Stay still, please."

With a sigh, Will admitted, "Tell me one of them tales you fancy so much."

A soft kiss landed on his temple, the warmth of Hannibal's lips a fleeting reassurance. "Very well," Hannibal acquiesced, his fingers resuming their work on Will's hair.

Will's head nestled against Hannibal, feeling the warmth of his body against the backdrop of the quiet afternoon.

"Bellerophon, a mortal with aspirations beyond his station," Hannibal began, the timbre of his voice rich and captivating, "was tasked with conquering the Chimera, a creature that struck fear into the hearts of men with its lion's body, a serpent's tail, and a goat's head sprouting from its back."

Will listened attentively, the rhythmic snip of hair blending with Hannibal's storytelling like a soothing melody. "The gods favored Bellerophon, gifting him a golden bridle crafted by Athena herself. With this divine gift, he approached Pegasus, the winged horse born of the Gorgon Medusa's blood."

A cascade of sensations enveloped Will, his mind conjuring images of mythical creatures and the vastness of ancient landscapes. He closed his eyes, surrendering to the vividness of Hannibal's narrative.

Hannibal's fingers moved through Will's hair with a skilled grace as he continued, "Pegasus, magnificent and untamed, resisted Bellerophon at first. It took cunning and humility for the mortal to approach the winged steed. Bellerophon calmed Pegasus, fastening the golden bridle, and thus, a bond was formed between man and beast."

Will shifted, opening his eyes and craning his neck to catch Hannibal's gaze, their eyes locking in the midst of the ancient tale. "And together," Hannibal spoke, his voice carrying a weight of ancient wisdom, "they faced the Chimera, a foe that embodied chaos and destruction. Bellerophon, guided by Pegasus, slew the monstrous creature and emerged victorious."

"Yet," Hannibal continued, the blade glinting in the sunlight as he cut through another strand of hair, "Bellerophon's hubris led him to believe he could ascend to the divine realms. Zeus, angered by this arrogance, sent a gadfly to sting Pegasus."

Will furrowed his brow, the imagery vivid in his mind. "The sting startled Pegasus, causing Bellerophon's fall from grace," Hannibal explained. "The once-heroic mortal lay broken and blind on the earth, punished for daring to defy the gods."

Will's mind wandered into the realm of imagination. In the midst of Hannibal's storytelling, he envisioned himself as Pegasus, a creature of ethereal beauty and untamed might. Ivory fur shimmered in the sunlight, and a golden mane cascaded down his neck, the embodiment of a mythical steed.

He felt the weight of wings, majestic and blindingly white, stretching wide against the azure sky. Imagined himself soaring through the heavens, solitary yet free, a creature unmatched in its grace. Will marveled at the image in his mind, the embodiment of a magnificent being untouched by the ravages of time.

In this fantasy, a figure materialized at his side—Hannibal, as the warrior Bellerophon, but also as a companion, an equal in strength and cunning. Dressed in attire befitting a man of

battle. Will couldn't help but be drawn to the notion of Hannibal not as the captor but as the partner, both chaos and destruction personified.

His mind played out scenes of a bond forged through battles, a connection that transcended the limits of mortal understanding. Together, they faced adversaries, the echoes of their combined strength reverberating through the mythical lands they tread. Will imagined Hannibal's eyes, fierce and determined, reflecting the untamed spirit of a man who dared to stand beside the immortal.

Yet, as the story unfolded in Will's mind, a subtle shift occurred. The image of Pegasus wasn't merely a captive beast. Instead, he envisioned himself willingly bound to Hannibal, a partnership born of choice rather than conquest. He saw Hannibal as the one who tamed his heart, a Pegasus willingly guided by the touch of a warrior's hand.

In the myth, Pegasus suffered from a divine sting, a punishment for Bellerophon's hubris. Will imagined himself, the immortal steed, feeling the sting not as a consequence of defiance but of emotion. The act of opening his heart to another, willingly exposing himself to the pain that could follow.

Frowning, Will questioned the narrative he had spun. Perhaps, he mused, the roles were interchangeable. Maybe Hannibal, with all his complexities and depths, was the Pegasus—powerful, elusive, and free. Will, in turn, was the one who dared to tame such a creature, to bind himself to the chaos that Hannibal embodied.

Turning within Hannibal's embrace, he kissed him.

Will and Hannibal guided their horses through a rocky terrain. Will could feel the heat of the day, a persistent companion that clung to his skin like the dust kicked up by their hooves. His worn hat shaded his eyes, and he wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand.

The landscape around them transformed, the flat plains giving way to large, looming rocks with a fiery red hue. Dry earth crunched beneath the horses' hooves, and Will bit his lip, studying the play of the sunset colors on the orange rocks. The West, with its vastness and ever-changing scenery, held a beauty that could be both breathtaking and unforgiving.

As they rode on, the terrain shifted, revealing a body of water that caught Will's attention. He glanced at Hannibal, whose eyes were fixed on the water as well. The river, a tributary that connected to the larger one snaking its way throughout the land, seemed to beckon them.

Will pondered their options. They shouldn't stop. The dangers that lurked in the shadows, the relentless pursuit they faced, demanded constant vigilance. But bone-tired from the morning's fight, his muscles aching, Will found himself yearning for a moment of respite. The need for a good wash, to feel the cool embrace of water on his skin, weighed heavily on him.

He sighed, breaking the companionable silence between them, and asked, "Hannibal, reckon we could turn in for a bit? Rest our horses and ourselves." The nod from Hannibal was all the agreement he needed. Will steered their horses towards the small shore of the tiny river, the water glistening like a siren's call under the setting sunlight.

Dismounting with a groan, Will stretched his arms over his head, feeling the satisfying pop in his spine. The day's tension seemed to seep away, replaced by a moment of respite. The water, its blue cloudy surface eerily calm, invited them like a promise of tranquility. A small smile played on Will's lips as he appreciated the quiet beauty of the scene.

"Reckon the river stopped its currents just for us," Will mused, his tone a mix of exhaustion and amusement. The horses, sensing the pause, dipped their heads to drink from the calm waters, and Will couldn't help but feel a sense of gratitude for the temporary reprieve. In this vast, untamed land, where danger lurked at every turn, the simple act of pausing by the water felt like a stolen moment of peace.

Hannibal, too, dismounted gracefully, and Will caught a glimpse of appreciation in his eyes.

The sun dipped lower, casting a soft glow on the riverbank as Will watched Hannibal unbutton his shirt. Will couldn't help but be captivated by the silver-streaked hair that caught the dying sunlight. The colors, a myriad of shades, glistened like a secret whispered by nature itself. Will's fingers fumbled with his own shirt buttons, a simple task that suddenly felt unfamiliar under Hannibal's watchful gaze.

Will scolded himself silently, a gruff acknowledgment of the fact that he shouldn't be acting like a schoolgirl. Yet, he couldn't deny the truth that stared him in the face—Hannibal was beautiful. His features, a delicate dance of refinement and ruggedness, held a magnetic allure that went beyond the surface. Silver strands framed his face, and Will marveled at the notion that a natural head of hair could possess so many colors.

His shirt now open, Will shifted his gaze back to Hannibal, the sun casting a warm glow over the older man's exposed skin. It was a sight that, despite the times he had seen it, never failed to leave him in awe.

He wondered which part of Hannibal he desired more. His lips hungered for the taste of Hannibal's, a craving that had become as familiar as the call of the wild. His skin, roughened by years under the unforgiving sun, yearned for the touch of Hannibal's fingers—a touch that could both soothe and ignite a fire within him. The specifics didn't matter. Any part of Hannibal would do, for it was Hannibal himself who captivated him.

Hannibal's beauty, like the sharp edge of a knife, cut through the layers of Will's stoicism. It was a revelation he hadn't noticed until he looked down and found himself bleeding, the blood pooling at his feet like the river water. The cowboy, a creature of the frontier, stood on the riverbank, his shirt open, baring not just his skin but the tangled mess of emotions within him.

Will's hands moved to unclasp his belt. He noticed a subtle tremor coursing through his fingers, a tremble he couldn't quite place but suspected had something to do with the intensity of Hannibal's gaze fixed upon him. Hannibal, standing bare-skinned and breathtaking, approached him with an effortless grace that made Will's breath hitch.

His trembling hands stilled as Hannibal took charge, gracefully undoing Will's belt with a practiced ease. Will swallowed hard, the realization dawning on him that he wanted—no, he pined for something he had never known. The way Hannibal looked at him, the way the world seemed to narrow down to just the two of them, made Will feel stupidly wanton.

Hannibal stepped out of his own pants, revealing more of that perfect form that left Will feeling exposed in a way he couldn't articulate. The layers of clothing stripped away, leaving them both fully bared in the dwindling sunlight of the West. Will, scrambling to keep pace with the man who seemed to navigate his way through life with an otherworldly elegance, stepped out of his own pants.

He walked toward the water, the once-clear boundary between his skin and the elements now blurred by the intimate presence of Hannibal. The river beckoned, its blue waters reflecting the colors of the sky. Will couldn't deny the allure of the water, a soothing balm to wash away the remnants of the day's turmoil.

As he entered the river, the cool water embracing his body, Will felt a shiver coursing through him. He lowered himself fully, the water rising around him like a comforting embrace. The evening air, heavy with the scent of earth and the promise of a cooler night, mingled with the soft murmurs of the river.

Will swam toward Hannibal, a silent dance that mirrored the ebb and flow of the water. Always following where Hannibal led. The feeling of being stripped naked, both physically and metaphorically, gnawed at Will. Yet, in this shared exposure, there was a strange sense of freedom.

When he reached Hannibal, his heart pounded in his chest like the hooves of a wild stallion. "Howdy," Will greeted, his own voice sounding oddly loud against the hushed ambiance. He winced at his own awkwardness.

Hannibal, his smile serene and his eyes holding a depth that seemed to unravel mysteries within Will's soul, responded with a simple, "Hello, Will."

The river's gentle currents embraced Will like a lover, cleansing away the day's grime, dust, and the lingering flecks of blood that told tales of their recent skirmish. Will's exhale was a sigh of relief, a baptism in the cool, soothing waters of the river. Hannibal, a skilled hand at navigating not just the wilderness but also the intricacies of the human form, found his way to Will's shoulders. His touch was firm, kneading out the knots that had settled beneath Will's skin.

Will couldn't help but drop his head onto Hannibal's shoulder, a quiet surrender to the simple pleasure of touch. Independence, a trait he had clung to fiercely, seemed inconsequential in the face of Hannibal's ministrations.

As Hannibal worked, Will's mind wandered to the uncertain future that stretched before them. They were hunted, pursued by shadows that lurked in the vastness of the West. Where they could go, and more importantly, where they should go, remained an unanswered question. A flicker of thought ignited in Will's mind—a memory, a longing—for a place he had consciously avoided, both physically and mentally.

New Orleans. The South.

Images danced in his mind—old buildings standing proudly, bayous meandering through the landscape, and a city that once thrived with life and culture. A place now haunted by the relentless advance of the undead, much like the desolate West they traversed. Will wondered what had become of his hometown, what scars the years had etched upon its face.

Hannibal's hands continued their soothing motions, and Will found himself nuzzling against the older man's jaw. A comforting silence enveloped them, broken only by the soft murmurs of the river. Unbidden, thoughts spilled from Will's lips, his voice a mere whisper against the backdrop of nature.

"I think... I think we should travel more South," Will admitted, a realization that surfaced from the depths of his consciousness. The admission surprised even himself, and he frowned at the unexpected thought he had just exposed. Hannibal, attuned to the nuances of Will's mind, noticed the shift.

"Why the South?" Hannibal inquired, his voice a warm current that mingled with the river's gentle song. Will's shrug carried a weight of uncertainty, his eyes narrowing as he gazed into the distance.

"It just ain't good to stay in the West no more," Will confessed, his drawl echoing through the quiet air.

Hannibal, ever perceptive, remarked, "The past has its claws in you, Will." A scoff escaped Will's lips, a bitter sound in response to the undeniable truth.

Will found himself wrestling with a peculiar desire. It wasn't the thirst for adventure that had fueled his years of roaming the landscapes of the West, nor was it the yearning for solitude that drove him to confront the outlaws and miscreants that plagued the frontier. No, this was a different kind of want, a quiet yearning that whispered through the rustling of the plants lining the riverbank.

As Hannibal's hands continued their skilled dance across his shoulders, Will felt an inexplicable urge to bare more than his physical form to his companion. He wanted Hannibal to know him—not just the gunslinger who roamed the wild, but the man beneath the dust-covered hat and weathered boots. It was a yearning to be seen, truly seen, stripped of the masks and facades he wore like armor.

The light played in the depths of Hannibal's eyes, a flickering reflection of the countless stories etched into Will's soul. With each pass of Hannibal's fingers, Will felt a quiet plea echoing within him—an invitation to unravel the intricacies of his life, the tales woven into the fabric of his being. He wanted Hannibal to dig deeper, past the scars that adorned his skin, past the layers of grit and grime, until he reached the core of who Will Graham truly was.

The thought both thrilled and terrified him. Yet, the desire persisted, stubborn and unyielding like the stubborn sprouts of grass that dared to grow in the arid desert.

He imagined Hannibal's hands not just massaging the knots from his shoulders but delving deeper, reaching beneath the surface of his flesh to touch the very essence of his existence.

With a deep breath, Will began sifting through the fragments of his past, careful not to disturb the ones laden with too much emotion, the ones that delved into the abyss of despair. Instead, he sought memories that were light, airy, reminiscent of a time before the outbreak, a time before the world crumbled under the weight of chaos.

"Hannibal," he began, his voice a rich drawl that carried the weight of reminiscence, "I used to live near the bayou. In those days, life was simpler. Just a boy with the sun on his face and the dirt under his bare feet."

His eyes, usually guarded, softened as he delved into the fragments of a time untouched by the taint of decay. "You ever been to the bayou, Hannibal? It's like a different world down there. Cypress trees draped in Spanish moss, castin’ shadows on the still waters."

Will's fingers traced invisible patterns in the water, mimicking the dance of the bayou's ghostly flora. "I'd play barefoot, feelin’ the cool mud squish between my toes. My Pa would scold me for gettin’ dirty, but it didn't matter. I was free, soakin’ up the sun like a lizard on a rock."

"Mio caro," Hannibal murmured, the endearment rolling off his tongue with a certain tenderness. "I adore the way your eyes light up when you speak of your childhood, Will. It's as if the very essence of your soul is illuminated by those memories."

His fingers traced patterns on the water’s surface, mimicking Will's earlier gestures. "I, too, had moments of tranquility in my past," Hannibal confessed, his voice carrying a cadence that echoed through time.

Will watched as a soft smile graced Hannibal's lips, a gentle acknowledgment of the beauty that once existed in the world. "Snails," he continued, his eyes glinting with the fondness of remembrance. "Our garden was filled with them. Mischa found them fascinating—slow, deliberate creatures making their way through the leaves and soil. She'd watch them for hours, entranced by their simplicity."

Hannibal's fingers brushed over the imaginary shells of snails on the water, as if conjuring the memory into existence. "She would tell stories about each snail, as if they had their own personalities and adventures. In those moments, the world felt small, contained within the confines of our little garden."

"Hannibal," he began, his voice a low drawl that echoed in the quiet space, "do you still see Mischa in your mind palace?"

Hannibal looked at Will with a softness that seemed to transcend the harsh reality surrounding them. A small smile graced his lips, a tender acknowledgment of the question that stirred memories long kept within.

"Yes," Hannibal replied, his voice a smooth cadence. "Mischa resides in my mind palace, a sanctuary of memories and echoes of a time long gone. Some rooms, however, are doors I cannot bring myself to open."

A flicker of melancholy passed through Hannibal's eyes, a glimpse of a man haunted by the ghosts of his past. "There are chambers where the pain is too acute, where I fear the weight of grief may consume me. Yet, in other rooms, she is alive and laughing."

Will's gaze softened as he absorbed the imagery Hannibal painted with his words. "Sounds beautiful," he muttered, an acknowledgment of the fragile beauty that lingered in the fragments of Hannibal's memories. "I reckon those rooms are like pieces of heaven in your mind."

Hannibal's eyes met Will's, a shared understanding passing between them. "Your mind palace, Will, is a complex labyrinth of emotions and experiences. Do you still see all the rooms clearly?"

Will sighed. "I think all my rooms are locked," he confessed, his voice tinged with a raw honesty. "Locked, and I swallowed the key. Nothin' I wanna revisit there."

Hannibal's gaze remained steady, a silent invitation to delve into the recesses of Will's mind. "You carry heavy burdens, Will," Hannibal murmured. "But keys can be found or fashioned anew. Perhaps one day, you will unlock those doors, explore the chambers, and confront the shadows within."

Will scoffed, a bitter edge to the sound. "Ain't sure I want to."

Hannibal's fingers reached out, gently cupping Will's cheek. "You have the strength to confront your past, Will. And if you choose not to unlock those doors, you can build new ones."

Will raised an eyebrow, skepticism etched on his features. "Build new rooms?"

A subtle smile played on Hannibal's lips. "In my mind palace, I find myself opening new doors where I find you," he confessed.

Will's eyes widened, a flicker of surprise in their depths. "Me?"

Hannibal nodded, his thumb gently tracing the curve of Will's cheekbone. "Yes, you, Will. You are becoming a cornerstone in the architecture of my mind."

The thought that he occupied a space in Hannibal's intricate mind palace stirred a profound sense of contentment within him. It was as if delicate flower petals were unfurling inside his chest, their stems winding around his ribs, reaching toward his heart.

Hannibal's arms encircled Will's waist, their bodies submerged in the tranquil waters. Will couldn't help but release a happy sigh, the simple pleasure of Hannibal's touch adding a new layer of serenity to the already peaceful scene.

Feeling Hannibal's arms around him, Will couldn't contain the impulse to express his yearning to reveal the layers of his past. He wanted Hannibal to see the Louisiana he grew up in, the dusty trails of his childhood, the humble abode that sheltered him from the storms of life. Will longed for Hannibal to know the genuine, unadorned version of him—the boy who reveled in the simple joys of bugs, frogs, and the feel of dirt between his fingers.

As Hannibal's arms tightened around him, Will muttered, almost to himself, "I want to show you New Orleans." The words were soft, carried away by the rustling grass and the soothing river current. Hannibal, sensing the sincerity in Will's voice, asked in a curious hum, "What was that, Will?"

With a firmer resolve, Will repeated, "I want to show you New Orleans." This time, the words hung in the air, carrying with them the weight of Will's earnest desire. Hannibal's lips curled into a warm smile, his eyes reflecting a genuine interest.

"New Orleans," Hannibal echoed. "If you wish it, then we shall go." Will felt a surge of joy at Hannibal's response, a childlike eagerness bubbling within him. The idea of sharing his roots with Hannibal, of unveiling the layers of his identity in the city that held fragments of his past, brought a sense of anticipation.

"Do you really want to?" Will asked, a hint of uncertainty in his voice. He felt a pang of self-consciousness, as if he were exposing too much. However, Hannibal's reassuring smile melted away those doubts. “I would follow you anywhere, Will.”

Hannibal's declaration that he would go anywhere Will went echoed in Will's heart, resonating with a sweetness that enveloped him like the warm breeze.

Will's chest swelled with emotion, a million sizes too big for his hardened cowboy exterior. A tenderness, soft and almost painfully sweet, washed over him as he gazed at Hannibal. Hopeless tenderness, as if he had stumbled upon something fragile, something he never expected to find.

It was a moment that felt like the culmination of a lifetime of searching, a journey through the vast expanse of the West, seeking something elusive. Hannibal had found him, not just physically, but in the recesses of his soul. The question that lingered in the air—Hannibal asking if he had a destination—had found its answer in the connection that now bound them together.

As Will looked at Hannibal, he marveled at the profound truth of it all. This, right here, was the destination. The place where they sat, entwined in the river's gentle current and the whispers of the evening breeze. It felt like coming home after a long and arduous journey, only to discover that home was not a place but a person.

Hannibal had offered himself wholly, and Will couldn't help but feel an overwhelming tenderness for the man standing before him. In this quiet, secluded space, Hannibal could lay bare the darkest corners of his soul, unravel the worst deeds he had committed, and Will would hold them up to the light without flinching.

Will still grappled with the ugliness of his own hand, unsure how to intertwine it with Hannibal's without acknowledging the sins etched into his skin. Yet, he understood that Hannibal had become the life he needed all along. A companion, a confidant, a fellow wanderer through the vastness of the West.

As Will sighed, his eyes fixed on the horizon painted in hues of twilight, he entertained the possibility of a different kind of future. Maybe, just maybe, they could carve out a place of solace in this desolate world. The South beckoned to him, a distant memory of warmth and

familiarity that could either cradle them or condemn them, depending on the severity of the decay that had taken root.

The image of a small, weathered house nestled amidst rolling hills and open fields flickered in Will's mind. A place he could mend, where the creaking floors and sagging beams would bear witness to their shared existence. A home, modest and unassuming, where they could escape the perpetual motion of travel and simply live.

He envisioned himself working on repairs, hands calloused from the toil but content. Finding the necessary materials, scavenging for remnants of the past to reconstruct a semblance of normalcy. Will could imagine growing a garden, coaxing life from the stubborn earth, and nurturing something other than the perpetual cycle of survival.

It was a fanciful dream, a mirage in the arid expanse of their current reality. Yet, the allure of peace, the simplicity of a life shared with Hannibal, tugged at the edges of Will's heart. The notion that they could abandon the ceaseless pursuit, the relentless hunt, and find refuge in each other's company was both tantalizing and treacherous.

Will acknowledged the foolishness of such thoughts, the idiocy in believing that a man like him could grasp a semblance of happiness. The world had proven itself to be unforgiving, a relentless adversary that showed no mercy. And yet, the desire burned within him, an almost childlike yearning for a happiness that seemed elusive yet achingly close.

In that moment, as the hues of the setting sun painted Hannibal in shades of gold, Will once more found himself contemplating the notion of fallen angels. Lucifer, once an angel, had tumbled from grace, yet Will couldn't fathom Hannibal in such a light. No, if Hannibal had fallen, it wasn't a punishment; it was a purposeful descent into something more profound. A demon, perhaps, not in the malicious sense but a being chosen for temptation, for sin, for a cleverness that mirrored the cunning of the serpent. And, oh, how beautiful he was in his red-eyed allure.

Will's thoughts circled back to his own maddening desire. It was a damnable thing, a beguiling force that gripped his heart and refused to let go. He understood, at least to some extent, the depth of his feelings. There was no escaping the tendrils of want, no matter how much he might try to resist. But, oddly enough, he didn't want to.

Chapter End Notes

I planned out the entire story and I've estimated it to be around 14 chapters. I will write an epilogue as well!:3

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The town square lay quiet under the harsh sun, the air thick with anticipation and the looming threat of danger. The wooden buildings, worn by time and the unforgiving sun, seemed to huddle together in silent trepidation. Dust devils danced in the distance, swirling like phantoms on the outskirts of the desolate town.

Will stood in the middle of the dirt-packed street, his boots dusty and worn, the heels clicking softly as he shifted his weight. His Colt rested snug in its holster, the leather creaking with every subtle movement. His weathered hat shielded his eyes from the blazing sun, its brim casting a shadow that danced with the wind-blown grains of sand.

Beside him, Hannibal stood with an eerie calmness, his gaze sharp and unwavering. The sun glinted off the blade of the knife he held in his hands, a glimmering promise of the violence that lingered in the hot, stagnant air. Will's fingers itched against the grip of his Colt, a subtle reminder of the perilous game they were about to play.

The approaching figures, dark silhouettes against the vast canvas of the desert, sent shivers down Will's spine. Clad in black leather, the riders appeared as specters from a nightmare. Their faces hidden behind masks, and their hats pulled low, they rode with an unnatural stillness that seemed to defy the very essence of the arid landscape.

Will's gaze narrowed as he tried to discern any details from the distant riders. Their approach was deliberate, each hoofbeat echoing like a distant war drum signaling an impending conflict. The cape-like dusters they wore billowed behind them, stirred by the unrelenting wind that seemed to howl a mournful tune.

The town's stillness intensified as the riders drew closer. The only audible sounds were the rhythmic clop of horse hooves and the whispering wind that carried the stench of impending violence.

Hannibal's presence, though poised and composed, emanated a sense of danger—a predator awaiting the perfect moment to strike. His eyes, the color of red flint quartz, remained fixed on the approaching riders. There was no fear in Hannibal's stance, only a predatory readiness that mirrored the dangerous dance of a coiled snake.

Will couldn't shake the feeling of inevitability that settled over the town. The past, with its sins and regrets, seemed to converge with the present. He had known, deep down, that this would catch up to them, like a relentless shadow that clung to the heels of their every step.

The desert sun beat down mercilessly, the heat mirages distorting the horizon. Will's mouth felt dry, his tongue sticking to the roof like parched leather. He swallowed, a conscious effort to steel himself for the confrontation that awaited them.

The riders drew nearer, and as their features began to take shape, Will's heart quickened its pace. The masks obscured their faces, rendering them faceless specters of doom. Yet, there was a malevolence in their presence, a palpable aura that signaled ill intent. The town now felt like a tinderbox ready to ignite.

Will's fingers brushed against the familiar weight of his Colt, the cool metal providing a semblance of reassurance. He had faced danger before, stared into the abyss and emerged with scars that whispered tales of survival. But this, this felt different—a reckoning, a settling of accounts that had long been overdue.

Hannibal, by his side, remained an anchor in the storm. Will's eyes sought solace in the familiarity of the man who had become more than just a companion. The desert wind tousled Hannibal's hair, but his expression remained serene and composed. Yet, Will knew better. He had seen beyond the mask, into the depths where excitement simmered like molten gold.

Hannibal's eyes, red as the burning embers of a dying fire, held a glint that spoke of more than mere anticipation—it was a hunger for the impending chaos, an eagerness for the dance of violence that lingered on the horizon.

As Hannibal's eyes locked onto him, Will could see the spark of fervor within, a flame that flickered and danced with a predatory delight. The pupils were dilated, expanding like the black void of a hungry abyss. Will found himself captivated by those wine-colored eyes, the intensity of which threatened to drown him in a sea of anticipation.

The wind carried the scent of dust and tension, but in that moment, the world seemed to shrink to the space between Will and Hannibal. The air buzzed with an energy that transcended the arid surroundings, an electric charge that bound them in the quiet before the storm.

Will's initial discomfort at Hannibal's excitement had transformed. Instead of resentment, a shared understanding had taken root within him. He felt the anticipation coursing through his veins, the rhythm of his own heartbeat syncing with the chaotic drumbeat of the imminent confrontation.

Will recognized the reflection of his own fervor mirrored in those red orbs. It was a communion of souls, a shared recognition that they were bound by the choices they had made and the consequences that awaited.

In that charged moment, Will vowed silently that this wouldn't be the last time he witnessed the fiery glimmer in Hannibal's eyes. No matter the outcome of the impending clash, whether it be victory or defeat, the dance they shared was far from its final encore.

The blood in his veins surged like molten lava, each pulse a reminder that they stood at the precipice of something profound.

Will had always been a violent man. It was a truth etched into the very fabric of his existence, a reality as unyielding as the desert sun overhead. His life had been woven with the threads of bloodshed, violence, and death, each action shaping him into the hardened cowboy he had become.

Urge, an unwavering force coursing through his veins, had always driven him. A primal call to arms that resonated within him, urging him to act without remorse, without the flutter of an eyelash or the hitch of breath.

Violence was as much a part of him as his very heart, a companion that had ridden alongside him through the vast expanse of the frontier. It had become second nature, an instinct that lay dormant beneath the calm exterior of his cowboy facade. His blade had tasted the lives of many and its cold steel had become an extension of Will's own hand.

In the harsh glow of the desert sun, Will found a perverse comfort in the familiarity of his violent tendencies. It was a world where justice wore a stained coat, where the line between right and wrong blurred like the horizon at dusk. There was no room for moral contemplation in the realm of survival, and Will had long abandoned the luxury of such reflections.

As he stood in the shadow of his own nature, Will recognized the darker facets of his being. The urges, the cravings for the power that came with the act of taking a life, had woven themselves into the very fabric of his identity. It was a realization that cut through the layers of self-delusion, exposing the raw truth beneath.

The righteousness he derived from the act of killing was a peculiar satisfaction, a balm for the wounds inflicted by the harshness of the frontier. In this world of lawlessness, where justice was often meted out at the barrel of a gun, Will had become the arbiter of consequence. He delivered judgment with the precision of a marksman, and in that moment of retribution, he felt a perverse sense of vindication.

These men were bad, he assured himself. The riders approaching the town square, masked and cloaked in darkness, bore the weight of their sins. The devil himself had cast its gaze upon them. Will had stared into the abyss and emerged, not unscathed, but armed with the conviction that he held the power to mete out justice in this godforsaken land. The devil, they said, stared back at you from the eyes of the wicked.

If there were a way to turn back time, to rewrite the chapters of his life, Will knew he wouldn't. He wouldn't alter the course that led him here, to this desolate frontier, to the brink of life and death. Surprisingly, he didn't harbor wishes for a different past. The choices made, the sins committed—they were the threads that wove his existence.

He could envision it vividly, as if the desert winds whispered tales. In that imagined moment, Hannibal stood before him again, bloodied and glorious, a figure of allure and danger. If the hands of time could somehow reverse, if the fates allowed them to cross paths again, Will wouldn't turn away. He would let Hannibal tackle him.

Will would again see the cold press of steel against Hannibal’s throat, knife poised at the edge of possibility. A repetition of the perilous dance they had shared, a ritual etched in the fabric of their connection. And he would willingly submit to it all over again.

The ache of heartache and the toll of war were constants in Will's life, but Hannibal had been a constant too. Even when Will tasted only the bitterness of despair, Hannibal remained at his side. A dark force that cared for him amidst the chaos, a devil who saw through the layers of agony to the vulnerable core beneath.

The bond forged in blood and shared secrets had rendered Will unrecognizable to himself. Hannibal had unraveled him, leaving behind a tapestry of scars and yearning. And strangely, Will felt gratitude for it. Gratitude for the ruin Hannibal had wrought upon him, for the way Hannibal had shaped him.

No time for sentimentality now, Will thought, steeling himself against the rush of memories that threatened to surface. Here, he wasn't Will. He was the stoic cowboy with a heart as cold as ice, a lone rider with no past and no plans for the future. Here, he had no name. Here, he was a ghost.

He had learned the art of survival in the unforgiving crucible of life, raised in the ashes of hell and set on a path of destruction. A paradox, a riddle, a black sheep in the herd of Christ. He wasn't evil, and he wasn't good. He simply was.

Hannibal turned to Will, his gaze steady, and asked the question that hung in the air like a shadow. "What is our plan, Will?"

Will had no damn plan. He never did. Life in the West was unpredictable, a series of moments stitched together by the thread of survival. He wasn't a planner; he was a survivor, a man molded by the capricious whims of fate. The men approaching, ominous and foreboding, were just another twist in the winding trail of his existence.

A wry grin played on Will's lips as he turned to Hannibal, remembering their past conversation. "We'll kill 'em," he said, his drawl a low murmur against the backdrop of the encroaching night. The simplicity of the answer resonated with the truth of their existence. In this land, where justice was often dispensed at the barrel of a gun, survival demanded a willingness to pull the trigger.

Hannibal's smile, sharp and predatory, revealed the glint of his teeth. Will's heart, momentarily unlocking itself from its stoic facade, dared to hope. Hope that he would witness the calculated precision of those beautiful teeth in action.

The air hung thick with tension as the men on horseback skidded to a stop in a cloud of dust, their steeds rearing and neighing as if heralding the arrival of an impending storm. Will and Hannibal turned their heads in unison, eyes meeting the ominous figures that had ridden into their desolate corner of the frontier.

Will squared his shoulders, the sun casting long shadows across the uneven ground. The grip on his Colt tightened as he met the piercing eyes of the man who seemed to be their lead. He'd bet his last dollar that this was Luther, a man with a particular brand of madness etched into the emerald green depths of his gaze.

"Howdy," Will drawled, his southern accent thick, his voice a low rumble that echoed against the vast emptiness of the desert.

Beside him, Hannibal's greeting was more refined, a nod to civility even in the face of impending chaos. "Hello, gentlemen," he offered, his tone dripping with politeness that, to anyone who knew him, hinted at the underlying amusement he found in the situation. Will could almost hear the damn smile in Hannibal's voice.

Earlier that day

Will paced beneath the relentless gaze of the heat, his boots stirring the dust with each restless step. The desert stretched out before him, an unforgiving sea of sand and scrub that seemed to mock their every effort.

Hannibal leaned against his horse, a stoic figure surveying the landscape with an air of detachment. His gaze, however, was fixed on Will, who was caught in the grip of an anxious energy that radiated through the dry air like heatwaves. Will's thoughts tumbled out in a rapid cadence, a litany of concerns.

"I reckon It's gonna take a couple of months at this pace," Will muttered, his words a low murmur carried away by the wind. He chewed on the inside of his cheek, a nervous tic that betrayed the turmoil within. The desert had a way of making even the most resolute souls uneasy, and Will was no exception.

"We need more damn supplies," he continued, his voice carrying a note of urgency. "Water, food, anythin' to keep us goin'. Lucky we found that river. Otherwise, we'd be damned dry by now."

Hannibal's gaze remained fixed on Will, a silent acknowledgment of the concerns that plagued his partner.

A sense of restlessness clung to Will, an invisible force that compelled him to keep moving, to keep the horizon within reach. The bugs of unease crawled beneath his skin, their invisible pincers threatening to break free. Every pause felt like a luxury they couldn't afford.

Time, that elusive commodity, seemed to hang in the air like the shimmering heat. Will's intuition whispered of an impending threat. He could feel it in the way the wind carried the scent of uncertainty, in the distant echoes that played tricks on his senses.

"We should keep movin'," Will urged, his words laced with a sense of urgency. "We can't afford to stay still for too long. Too damn exposed."

After the weighty discussions and the resolute choices made under the cover of stars, Will couldn't shake the feeling that the desert itself was holding its breath, waiting for some unseen force to tip the delicate balance. He cast wary glances over his shoulder, half-expecting the specters of pursuers to materialize on the fringes of the horizon.

The decision to head South was both a lifeline and a harbinger of impending danger. Will's instincts told him that complacency could be their downfall.

His impatience manifested as a restlessness, an itch beneath his skin that demanded action. Waiting, even for the briefest of moments, felt like inviting trouble to settle in. The vast expanse of the desert seemed to amplify the ticking of an invisible clock, and the oppressive stillness pressed upon him like an unseen weight.

He took a deep breath, tasting the dry air that carried the scent of sagebrush and sun-baked earth. The decision to move lingered in his bones, urging him forward, away from the unsettling stillness that clung to the present moment.

The thought of the South, with its tangled memories and unresolved ghosts, stirred a mixture of anticipation and dread within him. Will's past, like a shadow, trailed behind him, threatening to cast its long fingers over the present.

Hannibal's calm voice cut through the silence, a counterpoint to Will's restless energy. "We have plenty of time, Will," he said, his tone soothing. But Will scowled, the urgency in his veins refusing to be tempered by Hannibal's composed demeanor. Time felt like both an ally and an adversary, and Will wasn't willing to squander a single moment.

The sudden touch of Hannibal's hands on his shoulders made Will bristle, an involuntary reaction to the proximity of another living being. The ghosts of his past, the screams of his father, echoed in the recesses of his mind. He hadn't returned to the South since the day he left his father to perish in agony, and the prospect of revisiting those memories was a daunting journey of its own.

Will scrubbed a hand over his face, frustration etched into the lines of his brow. "We don't know what we're goin' to find there," he confessed, his voice low. The image of his childhood home, now likely a dilapidated shell of memories, loomed in his thoughts. "I left it all behind, and I don't know what's waitin' for us."

Hannibal, ever composed, attempted to bridge the distance between them, his touch gentle and comforting. But Will recoiled, the weight of his emotions pressing down like a vise. He snapped at Hannibal, a sharp retort that held more bite than he intended. "I'm fine," he insisted, as if the repetition could make it true.

Yet, Hannibal persisted, his hands seeking Will's again, a gesture of comfort that Will both craved and resisted. He felt like a cornered animal, emotions clawing at the edges of his composure. "Quit it," he snapped again, the words laced with frustration. "I'm fine on my own."

But Hannibal, undeterred, continued his attempt to soothe the turmoil within Will. Lips pressed to Will's hands, a gesture that spoke of care and understanding, but Will couldn't bring himself to meet Hannibal's gaze. The emotion that threatened to spill over the edges felt like a precipice, and Will resisted looking into Hannibal's eyes for fear of unraveling completely.

Will yanked his hands away, a harsh gesture that seemed to cut through the tension. "I said I'm fine," he repeated, a mantra against the turmoil within. The conflicting emotions, the memories of loss, and the uncertainty of the future collided within Will. He took a step away from Hannibal, needing the space to breathe and collect himself.

Hannibal's arms enveloped Will, pulling him into an embrace that seemed to stretch the boundaries of time. Will tensed at the sudden closeness, the unexpected comfort of Hannibal's hold. His cowboy hat was now nestled between their bodies, and Hannibal's head found a resting place on it. A sigh escaped from Hannibal, a sound that held a mix of assurance and patience.

"What is eating at you, Will?" Hannibal's voice rumbled, the warmth of his breath tickling Will's skin. Will groaned in response, his discomfort evident even without words. Hannibal pressed further, urging Will to share his burdens. "Speak up, mio caro. There is no use stewing in your own thoughts."

Will grumbled, his words muffled in the fabric of Hannibal's shirt. "Takin' too long. We need to go. No time for dawdlin'."

Hannibal tightened his grip, his hands settling on Will's back. "We will be fine, dear Will."

But Will was having none of it. The urgency gnawed at him like a hungry wolf, and he couldn't shake the feeling that their respite was a mere illusion. Hannibal's lips brushed lightly against Will's throat, a tender caress meant to soothe. Will couldn't deny the effect, the tension in his muscles easing just a fraction.

"Calm yourself," Hannibal murmured, his words laced with endearments that danced in the air. Will resisted the pull, the warmth of Hannibal's embrace, his own stubbornness urging him to resist. But Hannibal persisted, his lips grazing over Will's skin with a hint of mischief.

Frustration built within Will. "No time for this, Hannibal. We gotta leave. Ain't safe to linger."

Hannibal's hands slid beneath Will's shirt, their touch a promise of intimacy that both distracted and aggravated. Will's fingers clenched, knotting in the fabric of Hannibal's shirt. His breath hitched as Hannibal's lips explored the sensitive skin of his neck, teasing and tempting.

"Dammit, Hannibal," Will muttered, a mix of annoyance and something deeper. The proximity, the allure of Hannibal's touch, tugged at the threads of Will's composure. He tried to resist, to maintain the urgency that urged him to leave, but Hannibal's caresses were a formidable distraction.

Hannibal's whispered words against Will's skin held a touch of arrogance. "We will not depart until you find peace, sweet boy."

Desperation crept into Will's voice as he moved his head to capture Hannibal's lips in a heated kiss. "I'm damn calm," he insisted, though the racing of his own heart betrayed the lie. Hannibal shook his head, denying Will's claim, his smirk evident.

"Hannibal, we're wastin' daylight," he grumbled, the urgency still gnawing at him.

Hannibal's touch, however, was nothing short of mesmerizing. His hands traced lazy patterns along Will's arms, a delicate thing that sent shivers racing through Will's body, defying the desert's oppressive heat. Hannibal's voice, a serpentine whisper, curled around Will's ear like a gentle breeze.

"Close your eyes, Will," Hannibal murmured, his words a gentle command. Will complied, exhaling audibly as if surrendering to the ritual. Hannibal's hands traced over Will's arms, the contact deliberate and unhurried.

"Now, let your imagination roam freely," Hannibal suggested, his lips now grazing the nape of Will's neck. "I will help you picture the Norman Chapel in Palermo, Italy. Let each detail unfold in your mind's eye."

Hannibal's words wove a vivid tapestry, conjuring images of the chapel with meticulous precision. "Imagine the golden mosaics that adorn the interior, depicting scenes of biblical

tales and celestial wonders. Picture the delicate interplay of light and shadow, as if the very walls breathe with life."

The heat of the desert seemed to fade as Hannibal transported them to a place far removed. "The chapel's architecture is a testament to human ingenuity—a fusion of Arab, Byzantine, and Norman influences. Columns carved with intricate patterns support the vaulted ceilings above, creating an atmosphere that transcends the earthly realm."

As Hannibal continued, Will found himself immersed in the descriptions, the words igniting a kaleidoscope of colors and shapes within his closed eyes. "Glass windows, a mosaic of jewel-toned hues, filter the light into a dance of colors. It is as if the divine itself is painted across the walls, an ethereal symphony in stone and glass."

The rhythm of Hannibal's words matched the beating of Will's heart, and the desert breeze carried away the urgency that had gripped him. Hannibal's voice became a soothing balm, each whispered detail a brushstroke that painted a masterpiece in the canvas of Will's imagination.

As Hannibal's words wove through the fabric of Will's imagination, the barren desert landscape transformed into the grandeur of the Norman Chapel. The colors painted in his mind were vivid, as if he stood beneath the mosaic-dappled ceiling, surrounded by the whispers of history. The sunlight streamed through the imagined glass, casting an otherworldly glow upon the dust motes that pirouetted in the air like celestial dancers.

Hannibal's voice, a melodic guide through this constructed reality, led Will deeper into the recesses of his own mind. "This is the foyer of my mind palace, Will," Hannibal explained, his words carrying the weight of a revelation. "It is severe, beautiful, and timeless, a sanctuary where the echoes of thought reverberate through the corridors of introspection."

Will stepped forward, his boots echoing on the pristine floor of the imagined chapel. His eyes fixated on a sight both arresting and strangely poetic—a skull graven in the stone beneath his

feet. It lay there, an undeniable reminder of mortality amidst the ethereal grandeur that surrounded it.

The skull appeared as if it were in prayer, its skeletal form frozen in a silent communion with the universe. Yet, as Will drew closer, the visage transformed. No longer a supplicant in silent prayer, the skull seemed to dance, its bony contours capturing the essence of movement.

Hannibal's voice resonated within the corridors of Will's mind. "Mortality is the ever-present companion to beauty, Will. It is a reminder that even in the grandeur of introspection, we are tethered to the ephemeral."

Will’s eyes snapped open. Time slowed as Hannibal, with a fluid grace, dropped to his knees before Will. A shudder coursed through Will's body, a cocktail of desire and anticipation. The ticking clock in the recesses of his mind seemed to fade away, leaving only the pulsating rhythm of his own heartbeat and the warmth emanating from Hannibal.

The urgency of their impending journey lingered in the background, but Will surrendered to the intoxicating pull of the present. There, in the midst of the desert, Hannibal became both sanctuary and tempest. Will wanted to lose himself in the labyrinth of Hannibal's touch, to unravel the threads of his own existence and become entwined with the man before him.

Hannibal seized the opportunity to indulge. With nimble fingers, he retrieved Will’s hardening cock from its confines. Will's eyes widened in fascination as Hannibal, with the precision of a serpent's strike, extended his tongue to explore.

Will, swept away by the unexpected turn of events, threw his head back with a shudder, his breaths becoming ragged and uneven. In a bold move, he yanked Hannibal's hat off, exposing the man's hair, and plunged his hand into the silken strands.

Hannibal enveloped Will’s cock with his hot, voracious mouth. Will's world seemed to teeter on the edge of equilibrium as he watched Hannibal bob his head in a rhythmic motion. A sudden, loud curse escaped Will's lips, punctuating the scene with an unexpected burst of reverence.

Will, captivated by the sight before him, watched Hannibal's eyes sparkle like dark gems, entirely consumed by the depths of his dilated pupils. Hannibal, with his lips wrapped around Will’s cock, appeared almost otherworldly—a corrupt angel, preternaturally handsome, yet harboring a quality that hinted at depravity. Unforgettable.

As pleasure unfurled within him, Will felt a bloom and contraction, a visceral reaction to the sight of Hannibal swallowing around him. Will suddenly felt himself come, and violent tremors coursed through Will, a symphony of sensations.

Seized by the moment, Will reached down and tangled his fingers in Hannibal's hair, guiding him upward. Their lips met in a fervent kiss. Will reveled in the taste of Hannibal, a heady blend of sweetness and his own saltiness.

For a fleeting eternity, Will lost himself in the entwining of their bodies and souls. All that remained was the image of the chapel in his mind, the dancing skull on the floor—a vivid tableau that seemed to merge with the tactile reality of their shared passion. The world, forgotten for that interval, faded into the background as Hannibal's thumb rubbed gently over Will's bottom lip.

A ragged sigh escaped Will's lips, the culmination of pleasure and longing. Hannibal smirked.

"I wish I could've seen your art," Will admitted, a wistful note in his voice. "Your drawin’s, your paintin’s."

Hannibal, his expression softened by the tender moment, replied, "If I had met you then, all my drawings would have been of you."

Will snorted, a familiar response to Hannibal's romantic inclinations. "You're a damn sap, you know that?"

In Hannibal's arms, Will felt a fluidity, a malleability that defied the stoic facade he often presented to the world. The desire to keep Hannibal close, to cover him with protection, to claim him as his own, welled up within Will. Hannibal, the center of his universe, was someone he wanted to elevate, to put on a pedestal above the unforgiving terrain that surrounded them. Always, always Hannibal.

Will, practical as ever, acknowledged the need to move forward. "We gotta get goin'."

Hannibal asked with a smirk, "Are you calm now?"

Will scowled in response but mumbled a begrudging, "Yes."

Will squinted over his shoulder, the sun's glare making it difficult to discern any distant figures. He shifted in the saddle, the leather creaking beneath him as his unease grew. The prickling sensation at the back of his neck intensified, a silent warning that they were not alone.

He stole a glance at Hannibal, his ever-calm demeanor unchanged. The man seemed impervious to the tension in the air, his focus seemingly fixed on the horizon. But Will knew better. Hannibal was too curious, too enamored with the mysteries that life offered, to let the possibility of being followed escape his notice.

A small settlement emerged on the horizon, a collection of weathered buildings that stood like weary sentinels against the vastness of the desert. Will sighed, considering their options. They could press on, let themselves be followed until the inevitable confrontation, or they could confront their pursuers head-on. The latter option appealed to Will's sense of pride, the notion of being watched and tracked like prey rubbing him the wrong way.

His lip curled in disdain at the thought of becoming the hunted. Will had never taken kindly to being trailed. He was a creature of the wild, a lone rider with a past as dark and mysterious as the desert itself. The idea of every move, every step being observed and analyzed grated against his very nature. It was ironic, he mused, that he held such disdain for being watched when the man by his side made an art of studying him.

Cursing under his breath, Will shifted in the saddle, feeling the weight of his colt against his hip. The dust kicked up by their horses hung in the air like a ghostly veil, adding to the ominous atmosphere that surrounded them. He glanced over at Hannibal again.

"Hannibal," Will muttered, his voice a low growl. "We're being trailed."

Hannibal turned his gaze toward Will, a small smile playing on his lips. "I was wondering when you would notice, mio caro."

The scowl deepened on Will's face. "You could've said something sooner."

Hannibal chuckled, the sound a soft melody. "I find your awareness quite endearing, Will. Besides, it is more fun to watch you unravel the mysteries around us."

Will's jaw tightened, the frustration bubbling within him. "This ain't a game. We got trouble on our tail, and I ain't in the mood for your cryptic musings."

Hannibal's gaze remained unwavering. "Trouble can be quite thrilling, don't you think?"

Will cast a glance over his shoulder, spotting the two men closing in on them. The two riders approached with a sense of impending danger hanging in the air like a storm waiting to break. Hannibal's wicked grin mirrored the reluctant one on Will's face as they turned their attention to the approaching figures on horseback.

"It would be impolite not to greet our guests," Hannibal purred, his tone dripping with amusement.

Will's lips curled into a matching grin. "Reckon it's high time for a chat, then."

As they guided their horses toward the town, Will observed the settlement with a keen eye. It was different from the others they had encountered – larger, with more substantial structures and a variety of materials. The feeling of danger intensified the closer they got, the town seemingly poised for their arrival.

The buildings rose higher, and the stores looked more prosperous, but Will couldn't shake the sense that something was amiss. The air buzzed with an undercurrent of tension, and he instinctively tightened his grip on the reins.

Steering his horse through the town, Will's eyes were drawn to a sight that sent a shiver down his spine – coffins, perched ominously on the side of one building. The stark reminder of mortality lingered like a foreboding warning, and Will couldn't shake the feeling that this encounter was more than a mere rendezvous with the two men on their tail.

The town square stretched out before them, the sound of hooves fading into a hushed silence as Will and Hannibal reined in their horses. Dust particles hung suspended in the air, caught in the slanting rays of the sun. The tension between them remained palpable, like the charged air before a storm.

"Do you believe in fate, Will?" Hannibal's question cut through the quiet, his voice carrying a certain weight.

Will furrowed his brow, his gaze fixed on Hannibal's figure. "Can't say I've given it much thought. Why do you ask?"

Hannibal's fingers toyed with the locket beneath his shirt, a gesture that spoke volumes. He seemed to be unraveling a thread of contemplation. "I used to shatter teacups on the floor," he admitted, a faint smile playing on his lips. "I would get mad when they did not come back together."

Will's expression remained guarded, curiosity glinting in his eyes. "What do you mean?"

Hannibal sighed, the sound carrying the weight of introspection. "We are born into a world of scenario and circumstance we do not control. I believe in my own power, in the choices I make, the destiny I carve for myself. However," he paused, a wistful note in his voice, "sometimes, I wish for the teacup to gather itself again on its own."

Will swallowed, the gravity of Hannibal's words sinking in.

Will guided their horses to a worn wooden post, tying the reins securely before hopping off with practiced ease. He looked around, the uneasy feeling settling in the pit of his stomach. This place, with its looming buildings and the stillness that hung in the air, felt like purgatory —an in-between where they were neither free nor trapped.

A flicker of memory danced through Will's mind, the words Hannibal had shared about Dante's journey. It felt fitting, like an allegory for their own predicament. Hannibal had spoken of purgatory, a place of waiting, cleansing, and redemption. Will couldn't shake the sensation that they, too, were caught in a space between the past and an uncertain future.

He recalled a conversation, the echoes of words exchanged with Hannibal in the quiet moments of their journey. Dante and Virgil—both roles inhabited by each of them. The distinction between guide and guided had blurred, and now, in this town, it seemed that Hannibal's words held an uncanny truth.

The rhythmic beat of horse hooves approached from behind, and Will instinctively placed his hand on the hilt of his colt. He and Hannibal turned in unison, their eyes meeting the unsettling sight of men clad in tattered, black leather that billowed like capes in the wind, giving them an eerie, otherworldly appearance.

The men dismounted, their faces obscured by the shadows cast by wide-brimmed hats pulled low over their eyes. Will felt the tension rise, a palpable energy that seemed to emanate from the figures.

Squinting against the wind, Will exchanged a knowing glance with Hannibal, his smirk betraying a hint of amusement. Sarcasm dripped from his voice as he greeted the approaching strangers, "Well, ain't this a warm welcome. To what do we owe the pleasure?"

One of the men stepped forward, his long silver hair flowing in the wind, partially obscuring his eyes. His voice, gravelly, cut through the stillness of the desert air. "Luther's got business with you two. He's on his way, but he sent us ahead to see if you're willin' to make things easy. Come peacefully, or he brings a whole posse to drag you both back."

Will's eyes flicked between the men, sizing them up. Luther's threat hung in the air like a storm gathering on the horizon. He leaned casually against the hitching post, the sun casting long shadows around him. "Luther, huh? Sounds like a real charming fella. You tell him we're not the kind to be muscled into anythin'."

Hannibal, standing next to Will, regarded the approaching men with a mixture of amusement and disdain. "Manners, gentlemen. At least allow us the courtesy of introductions before we dive into threats and ultimatums."

The same man, whom Will guessed was Luther's main messenger, regarded Hannibal with suspicion. "Names ain't gonna matter much soon. Either you come willingly, or we take you."

Will chuckled, the sound carrying in the stillness of the desert. "You've got a real persuasive way about you, friend. But I reckon we'll pass on your offer. Now, if you don't mind, we were on our way."

Dread settled in the pit of Will's stomach like a heavy stone, the weight of impending danger looming over the horizon. The realization that their moment of reprieve was fleeting, shattered by the arrival of Luther's men, sent a chill down Will's spine. It was almost poetic, the way the universe conspired to strip away any semblance of peace just as he dared to open his heart to hope.

Life had always been a series of battles for Will, a relentless struggle to carve a path through the unforgiving landscape of the West. He had become accustomed to the scratch and claw of survival, an instinct that had guided him through the ashes of hell he called his past. But this time, it felt different. This time, he wasn't fighting merely for survival; he was fighting for a life he'd only just begun to imagine.

Will's resolve hardened. He wasn't ready to surrender the newfound purpose that had lit a spark in the darkness of his existence. For the first time in a long while, he had someone by his side, a destination to aim for, and the flicker of a life he yearned to experience fully.

Life in the West had taught him to be resilient, to face the inevitable storms head-on. He squared his shoulders, tightening his grip on the colt at his side. The wind carried whispers of distant challenges, but Will was no stranger to adversity. He would be damned if he let go of the life he was beginning to build, a life that promised more than mere survival.

Hannibal's gaze met Will's, a silent exchange of understanding passing between them. They weren't going to go down without a fight—not when their dreams, their hopes, were hanging in the balance. The two men confronting them seemed to sense the defiance in the air, exchanging resigned glances before drawing their colts. Will felt the adrenaline surge through his veins, the familiar anticipation of a showdown.

The first shot rang out. Will's colt recoiled in his hand as he aimed and fired, the deafening report echoing through the stillness of the town. The bullet found its mark, and one of the men crumpled to the ground, his body collapsing like a marionette with severed strings. Will's eyes glinted with satisfaction—he was a marksman, a product of the unforgiving West. Hannibal's worth every damn bullet, he thought.

Beside him, Hannibal moved with a fluid grace, the dance of death in his every motion. In a seamless motion, he seized Will's knife from its sheath, the glint of the blade catching the

dying rays of the sun. With an expert flick of the wrist, Hannibal sent the knife hurtling through the air. The blade struck its target, landing square between the eyes of the remaining adversary.

Will couldn't help but offer a sardonic smile. "Good throw," he remarked, a hint of admiration laced in his tone. Hannibal merely nodded in acknowledgment, his demeanor as polished as ever. "Thank you," he replied with polite brevity, his eyes revealing a subtle satisfaction at the precision of his throw.

The scent of gunpowder hung thick in the air as Will retrieved his knife from the lifeless form sprawled at his feet. The rhythmic creak of the town provided a haunting backdrop to the aftermath of their confrontation. Will's hand lingered over the hilt of the knife, fingers tracing the well-worn grooves and carvings that adorned its surface.

He took a deep breath, savoring the metallic tang of victory and the dusty aroma of the Western air. The knife felt cool and familiar beneath his touch, an extension of himself. It had been with him through countless nights, etched with carvings born from restless hands during solitary hours.

As Will approached Hannibal, he gripped the knife tightly, a silent offering to his companion. The weight of the blade shifted from Will's hand to Hannibal's, a symbolic gesture that spoke volumes. Hannibal accepted the knife with a contemplative tilt of his head, his keen eyes studying the intricate details that told the story of its owner.

"How many men are comin’?" Will's voice cut through the heavy silence, a pragmatic edge to his tone. He needed to know what they were up against, to gauge the magnitude of the storm that loomed on the horizon.

Hannibal's senses were a finely tuned instrument, attuned to the subtleties of the world around him. He closed his eyes briefly, inhaling deeply as if savoring the information carried by the breeze. "Many," he replied simply, the word hanging in the air with a foreboding weight.

Will nodded, the gravity of the situation settling upon him. There was a tacit understanding between them—a recognition that this would be no ordinary skirmish. The challenges ahead were formidable, and they had only just glimpsed the shadows.

“You fear the worst, mio caro.” Hannibal murmured, his voice laced with a smirk.

He couldn't help but let out a bitter laugh at Hannibal's observation. "Always fear the worst, Hannibal. It keeps you alive in this damn world." The corners of Will's mouth quirked into a wry smile, the lines etched on his face betraying the weariness of a man who had faced the worst and lived to tell the tale.

A soft exhale escaped Will's lips, a mixture of resolve and the realization that their moment of respite was drawing to an end. There was no escaping the violence that lurked on the periphery of their lives.

He guided Hannibal into a tender kiss, a fleeting connection that spoke volumes in the silence of the gathering storm. This was not the last time, Will reminded himself, savoring the taste of shared warmth and the promise of fleeting moments. Their lips parted, leaving an echo of their connection lingering in the charged air.

"Are you ready?" Will asked, his gaze locking onto Hannibal's, searching for any flicker of doubt. Hannibal, with his usual calm demeanor, nodded in affirmation. It was a silent acknowledgment that they were bound together, not just by circumstance, but by the choices they made and the paths they forged through the harsh terrain of the West.

Hannibal's words hung in the air, a proclamation that sent a shiver down Will's spine. "We will wreak carnage in our wake," Hannibal declared with a certain relish, his words carrying the weight of a premonition. "Blood will be shed, and it will bloom beautifully.”

The image painted by Hannibal's words stirred a mixture of apprehension and acceptance within Will. He knew the path ahead was fraught with peril, but there was a strange beauty in the chaos they were about to unleash. Will nodded, his expression shifting into one of determination, a silent agreement to face the impending fight head-on. He wouldn't let anyone tear them apart, not now when the taste of hope lingered on the tip of his tongue.

He grasped Hannibal's hand firmly, their fingers intertwining like the unspoken vows of comrades in arms. All they could do now was wait.

Now

Luther, still perched on his horse, shot a glare in their direction. The man's hands tightened on the reins, black leather gloves creaking in protest. Will's eyes narrowed as he took in Luther's demeanor, sensing a storm brewing beneath the surface.

"You two have caused a hell of a ruckus," Luther snarled, his gravelly voice cutting through the stillness. His eyes bore into Will's, a manic intensity burning in their emerald depths. "Hunted like mad dogs we have, and you're lucky you made it this far."

Will's lips curled into a sardonic grin, his gaze unwavering. "Luck's a fickle thing, Luther. Sometimes it's on your side, sometimes it ain't."

Hannibal, ever the picture of composed elegance, interjected with a shrug. "Perhaps your men should invest in better skills if they wish to catch us. Their techniques were entirely juvenile."

Luther's face twisted in anger and Will couldn't help but relish the sight. "You killed good men," Luther spat, his words dripping with venom.

Will's gaze remained steady, his drawl unyielding. "Well, Luther, that's the thing about this world. Good men die, and bad men thrive. Seems you got a bit mixed up in the balance."

Hannibal spoke, a smirk playing on his lips. "It is the way of the West, my friend. Survival of the fittest, and we've proven quite fit."

The tension thickened, the air crackling with unspoken threats. Luther, unwilling to back down, continued to glare at the duo before him. "You're not leavin' here alive," he declared, his voice a low growl.

Will's grip on his Colt tightened further, his eyes narrowing. "Now, Luther, that's where you're wrong. See, we don't plan on dyin' today. But we sure as hell don't mind takin' a few with us if it comes to that."

The man's eyes flicked from Hannibal to Will, and he couldn't help but voice the question that danced on the edge of his thoughts. "Does he have a damn death wish?" The words were directed at Will, who merely shrugged, a smirk playing on his lips.

"Hannibal's just a strange one," Will drawled, his Southern accent hanging thick in the air. His gaze met the man's, and there was a challenge in those blue eyes that dared anyone to underestimate the danger that lurked beneath the veneer of casual indifference.

Luther regarded them with a measured intensity. After a pregnant pause, Will broke the silence. "What the hell do you want?" he asked, his voice rough and laced with defiance. "Must be damn important for you to come all the way down here."

Luther eyed them for a moment before getting straight to the point. "We want your tall friend. Make this easy on yourselves. Come with us, and no one has to die..yet," he offered, a veiled threat lingering in his tone. "Make it easy, and I won't shoot your head off your damn neck."

Will pretended to mull it over, a smirk playing on his lips. "No can do, partner," he said, the defiance clear in his voice. His fingers tapped idly on the grip of his Colt, a subtle warning to Luther that they weren't going down without a fight.

Hannibal, standing beside Will with an air of detached elegance, spoke again. "Your proposal lacks appeal, Luther. We have our reasons for being where we are, just as you have yours. If you want us, you will have to try a little harder.”

Hannibal's sly amusement danced in the lines of his face as he tsked, a low sound of disapproval. "How impolite, gentlemen," he remarked, his voice dripping with condescension. "The least you can do is ask nicely."

Will fought back a laugh, his lips twitching with the effort. Hannibal had a way of taunting people, like dangling a fish in front of a cat, and the prospect of seeing these men riled up only fueled the amusement. Yet, he knew better than to let it spill over; there was no sense in making the situation worse.

"Why can't we just kill 'em now?" one of the masked men growled through gritted teeth, impatience seeping into his words.

Luther snapped back, his tone sharp and decisive. "We need our meat as fresh as possible. You want to drag a damn corpse tethered to a horse through the dirt for miles and then eat that?"

Will's fingers flexed, his gaze never leaving Luther. The other man stayed silent, perhaps contemplating the gruesome logistics of dragging a corpse through the unforgiving terrain.

Hannibal, undeterred by the tension, continued his verbal dance. "Fresh meat, a sensible preference," he mused, a teasing glint in his eyes. "You would not want the flavor tainted by the stench of death, would you?"

Will suppressed a smirk, admiring Hannibal's ability to needle even in the face of danger. Luther shot Hannibal a glare, a silent warning that the games were only entertaining for so long.

Hannibal's low hum reverberated in the charged air as he contemplated the impending culinary dilemma. "A travesty indeed," he murmured, a glint of mischief in his eyes. He tilted his head, as if savoring the thought, and remarked, "I doubt you have the means to prepare me nicely. Marinated in garlic and olive oil, perhaps."

The man, growing increasingly irritated, shot back, "I'll eat that tongue of yours first so you shut up."

Hannibal's lips curled into a knowing smile. "A good choice," he replied, the casual acknowledgment of his own demise carrying an unsettling confidence.

Will's Southern drawl cut through the air as he finally spoke, his tone carrying the weight of a man who had faced down countless dangers in the untamed wilderness. "You can ask all pretty-like, but the answer's still the same. No deal, and no easy way out for ya," Will declared.

Will's fingers tightened around the grip of his colt as he watched the man, Luther, make a subtle move towards his holster beneath the black cape. The dance of tension unfolded, each participant acutely aware of the impending eruption.

Luther's voice cut through the silence, a demand veiled in false civility. "I'll ask again, you come nicely."

Will's smirk, a defiant curl of the lips, was accompanied by the flash of mischief in his eyes. "We want no part in your group. The West ain't a place for your kind of justice. It's either

killed or be killed, nothing fair about it. Your temper tantrum is stupid."

Luther's eyes, a stormy emerald green, narrowed as he retorted, "You think you can just waltz into our territory, kill our men, and walk away unscathed? This ain't how things work here, cowboy. You've got a debt to settle."

Hannibal, standing beside Will with an amused glint in his eyes, added, "Perhaps you should reconsider your choices, Luther. Sending your men into the jaws of danger has consequences."

Will's drawl resonated in the dry air as he continued, "Maybe if you hadn't sent your boys in the first place, they'd still be breathin'. Should've known better than to steal in these parts."

Without warning, Will drew his colt, the metallic click slicing through the tension. The shot echoed like thunder, and a man on the left crumpled to the ground, a lifeless heap in the dust. Luther's gang recoiled, momentarily stunned by the abrupt turn of events.

"You want a fight?" Will called out. "You got one."

The confrontation hung in the balance like a teetering tumbleweed, and Luther's sigh cut through the tension like the whisper of the desert wind. Will's keen eyes held steady on the man, Luther, as he spoke, his words a blend of resignation and simmering anger.

"You two are a real piece of work," Luther muttered, his voice carrying the weight of a threat and a promise. "I'll send a prayer your way, a real nice one."

Will scoffed, his Southern drawl dripping with skepticism, "God ain't been 'round these parts for a damn while. Don't reckon He'll be listenin' now."

Luther hummed in response, his gaze shifting to the men at his side. "Get 'em," he ordered, a directive that shattered the stillness like a cracked whip.

The command hung in the air like the acrid scent of gunpowder. The men on Luther's side, shadows draped in black leather, swiftly drew their weapons. Will's mind raced, the adrenaline-fueled instinct of survival kicking in. Without a moment's hesitation, he seized Hannibal's hand, yanking him out of the open. Shots rang out, the sharp cracks echoing through the tense air, bullets whizzing perilously close.

Cursing under his breath, Will guided them with urgency, weaving through the labyrinth of structures that comprised the makeshift town. The wooden planks beneath their boots reverberated with each hurried step. Bullets zipped past them, a deadly dance set to the rhythm of gunfire. Will's eyes scanned the surroundings, seeking refuge.

A small building loomed ahead, its weathered façade promising a brief respite. Will veered towards it, his grip on Hannibal unwavering. The bullets pursued them like vengeful spirits, the sound of their deadly pursuit punctuating the urgency of their flight.

As they reached the relative safety of the building's corner, Will pressed Hannibal against the rough-hewn wall, his chest heaving with exertion. Dust swirled in the air, catching the last rays of sunlight as the day descended into twilight. The town, once a silent witness to the eons, now echoed with the cacophony of violence.

"Well, Hannibal," Will drawled, his breaths ragged, "seems we've danced our way into a real mess."

Hannibal's eyes gleamed with a predatory glint, the chaos around them only adding to his enjoyment. "A dance, my dear Will, is only as beautiful as the partners involved."

Will rolled his eyes, a crooked smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Save the poetic nonsense for later. Right now, we've got bullets to dodge."

The symphony of gunfire continued, the men from Luther's group relentless in their pursuit. Will peeked around the corner, assessing the situation.

Cursing amidst the barrage of bullets, Will's voice cut through the chaos, a raw intensity in his words. "Hannibal, you better damn well listen to every word I'm sayin'!"

Hannibal, unfazed, nodded with a calm assurance. "I assure you, Will, your every word is a symphony to my ears."

With a determined resolve, Will seized Hannibal's hand once more, the connection between them a lifeline amidst the turmoil. They sprinted past the narrow opening between two weathered buildings, the staccato rhythm of gunfire accompanying their desperate flight. Will's eyes scanned the scene, his senses honed to the danger lurking in the shadows.

In the periphery of his vision, he spotted a man tensing and crumpling to the ground. Will's aim had found its mark, a brief satisfaction cutting through the tension. Yet, there was no time to dwell on victories, as the relentless pursuit urged them onward.

The town, a forgotten outpost at the edge of the wild, bore witness to their mad dash for survival. The wooden structures, once silent guardians of solitude, now echoed with the tumult of a battle waged on its dusty streets. Bullets sang their deadly hymn, each one a reminder of the precarious dance they navigated.

Will's heart pounded in sync with their hurried steps. He tightened his grip on Hannibal's hand, the understanding between them driving them forward.

As they approached an open space, Will's eyes darted around, anticipating the next move from Luther's men. The air crackled with tension, a palpable energy that hung heavy like the scent of impending rain. With a swift motion, Will aimed his colt once more, firing off a shot that found its mark, creating a momentary diversion.

"Keep movin', Hannibal!" Will shouted over the chaos, his voice cutting through the clamor of gunfire. They dodged behind a wooden cart, the cover providing a brief respite.

The dusty trail took an unexpected turn as Will and Hannibal rounded a corner, colliding with a man who seemed equally surprised by the sudden encounter. A cloud of dust erupted around them, the sun casting elongated shadows on the timeworn buildings.

Before anyone could react, the crack of a gunshot pierced the air. In a swift, almost choreographed movement, Hannibal wrenched the gun from the man's hand, his fingers dancing with a lethal grace. With a deft twist, Hannibal maneuvered the man into a firm hold, the captive's cries of pain muffled by the escalating chaos.

"Bastard!" the man spat, his defiance met with a chilling calmness in Hannibal's gaze. Will, eyes flickering with a mix of apprehension and readiness, observed the unfolding scene. Hannibal brought up Will's knife, a gleam of anticipation in his eyes. The blade glinted in the sunlight as it emerged from its sheath.

The man's pleas grew, the realization of his imminent fate etched across his face. In a fluid motion, Hannibal drew the knife across the man's throat, the crimson spray painting an arc in the dusty air. Will, quick to avoid the shower, sidestepped with a practiced ease.

Bloodied knife in hand, Hannibal disposed of the lifeless burden he held, the body collapsing to the ground. Will, seizing the opportunity, spotted the discarded gun. A swift retrieval and a practiced motion brought the weapon into Will's possession. He raised it with a steady hand, the weight familiar in his grip.

As if scripted by the fates, another adversary emerged. Will's eyes narrowed, his aim unwavering. The gunshot echoed through the streets as the man crumpled to the ground with a fatal wound. Will spat on the dry earth beneath him.

A tableau of blood and chaos framed Hannibal, drenched in the aftermath of their violent encounter, his eyes ablaze with a feral intensity that sent shivers down Will's spine. The desolation around them seemed to fade into insignificance as Will beheld the unearthly beauty of the man before him.

A mad surge of emotions welled within Will, a chaotic mix of awe, reverence, and an inexplicable desire to submit to the creature Hannibal was. In that moment, Hannibal transcended the boundaries of a mere mortal; he stood as a deity, a dark and commanding force that beckoned Will to kneel before him. It was a blasphemous impulse, an urge to worship at the feet of this enigmatic being, even as the whispers of God's abandonment lingered in the air.

Though God may have forsaken the West, the rumors of divine presence manifested in the gleam of Hannibal's eyes. Lucifer, beautiful and corporeal, stood before Will, and the realization of Hannibal as his own personal monster sent a thrill through him.

In the midst of the crimson-stained battlefield, where life and death danced their eternal waltz, Will's conviction solidified. Hannibal was his, a possession more profound than mere ownership. A primal instinct surged within Will – a protective ferocity that vowed to safeguard what was rightfully his.

The world, frozen in a fleeting interlude, erupted into chaos once more. The staccato rhythm of gunfire echoed through the desolation. Men screamed, their curses a discordant symphony as they rushed towards Will and Hannibal, the tendrils of violence snaking through the air like wildfire. Will broke his gaze with Hannibal, his senses heightened as the dance of bullets resumed.

Peering around the corner, Will's colt barked, another man crumpling under the force of his leaden justice. They moved with a serpentine grace, sinuous and elusive, as they slithered into the refuge of the saloon.

Inside, the air was thick with the acrid scent of aged wood and stale spirits. Will's eyes darted across the interior, a curse escaping his lips as he assessed their predicament. He cast a sidelong glance at Hannibal, determination etched into the lines of his face. "We'll be fine, Hannibal," he muttered, the southern drawl weaving through his words like a river through the plains. "Just gotta make it to the horses."

Their path to salvation lay on the other side of town, a dangerous expanse teeming with adversaries thirsting for retribution. The staircase beckoned, and Will led the way, his boots thudding against the wooden steps. Hannibal followed, a shadow trailing in the wake of Will's decisive steps. The second story offered a brief respite, a vantage point from which Will surveyed the tumult below.

"C'mon, Hannibal," Will urged, ducking low as gunfire sprayed through the air. "We gotta find a way out." A momentary lapse in the onslaught allowed them to press on, their destination clear in Will's mind. "Back window," he declared, his eyes meeting Hannibal's. "We'll take the path to the horses."

The onslaught continued, bullets tearing through the wooden walls like angry hornets. Will cursed as the shots punctured the wooden walls, creating ragged holes that exposed the danger lurking beyond. "Drop to the ground!" he yelled, and Hannibal followed the command without hesitation.

Crawling towards a front window, Will's senses heightened. He could feel the vibrations of chaos in the air, the tense anticipation of a relentless pursuit. A brief respite presented itself—a momentary silence in the symphony of violence. One second, two, and Will seized the opportunity.

Raising his head, he unleashed a rapid barrage of gunfire, each shot calculated and precise. The deafening cracks echoed through the saloon, and two men grunted in pain, their weapons falling silent. Will sighed, a breath of relief escaping him as the immediate threat subsided.

Beside him, Hannibal's voice cut through the lingering echoes. "That was magnificent," he observed with a hint of admiration. Will couldn't help but grin, his eyes glinting with a mix of pride and amusement. "Shut the hell up," he retorted, the tension momentarily broken by the exchange.

The dim light of the saloon's interior cast shadows on the worn floorboards as Will and Hannibal maneuvered towards the back window. Each movement sent a ripple of pain through Will's arms, the strain of the desperate escape taking its toll. Ignoring the protest of his muscles, he gritted his teeth.

As they reached the window, Will huffed a breath, exchanging glances with Hannibal. "We'll get up on the count of ten," he declared, his voice a low growl. He added a caution, "Don't you dare go on four." The gravity of their situation couldn't overshadow the glint of adoration in Hannibal's eyes. A grin played on Hannibal's lips.

"One," Will began, his eyes never leaving Hannibal's. The seconds stretched, the echoes of gunfire outside fading into the background. "Two," he continued, the urgency of their escape urging them forward. The back window stood as a portal to freedom, and Will couldn't afford to let Hannibal slip away.

"Three," Will's voice lowered, a warning underscoring the number. He tightened his grip on his guns. The chaos outside seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the duo's leap into the unknown.

"Four," Will paused, his gaze locked with Hannibal's. The unspoken plea echoed in his eyes – a plea to stay, to defy the inevitability of separation. Hannibal's grin widened, a mix of amusement and acknowledgment.

"Five," Will continued, a note of urgency creeping into his voice. The gravity of their circumstances pressed upon them, an understanding that lingered between heartbeats.

"Six," the seconds ticked away, each one a heartbeat in the symphony of survival. The back window beckoned, a narrow gateway to a world where their fates hung in the balance.

"Seven," Will's grip tightened further, his resolve mirrored in Hannibal's unwavering gaze.

"Eight," the numbers echoed through the saloon, a countdown to a leap of faith. The air, hot against their skin, whispered promises of escape and uncertainty.

"Nine," Will's voice wavered, a fleeting moment of vulnerability beneath the veneer of strength. The window loomed, a passage to a realm where their destinies awaited.

"Ten," Will declared, and with a shared breath, they surged upward. They tumbled through the opening, landing with a grace born from necessity on the other side.

Will's breaths came in ragged gasps, the air biting into his lungs as he and Hannibal sprinted through the narrow gaps between weathered buildings. The echo of their boots on the wooden planks mixed with the distant sounds of chaos— gunshots, yells, and the thundering y of pursuing men.

Will's guns spat lead and fire as he shot behind him, each pull of the trigger sending tremors through his fingers. The dark figures pursuing them danced in and out of the spaces. The buildings, mere silhouettes against the canvas of the Western sky, provided fleeting cover as they sprinted towards the awaiting horses.

The rhythmic thud of footsteps intensified, a relentless drumbeat accompanying their frantic escape. Will turned, his senses heightened by the surge of adrenaline. He squinted, tracking the oncoming figures with a practiced eye. He raised his colt and fired, the metallic report cutting through the night like a wolf's howl.

Beside him, Hannibal matched his movements with a deadly grace, each step purposeful and sure. The day seemed to ripple with a strange energy—a convergence of survival and defiance. As the men closed in, Will marveled at the sheer audacity of their pursuit, or perhaps the sheer incompetence that allowed him and Hannibal to continue dodging bullets.

The horses loomed ahead, sturdy creatures tethered to a wooden post. Will's heart pounded, a primal rhythm that resonated with the drumming sounds behind them. He spared a glance at Hannibal, their eyes locking. There was no need for words.

With a final burst of energy, they reached the horses. Will dropped his other gun while hands fumbled with the reins, fingers rough and calloused. He swung himself onto the saddle, the leather creaking beneath his weight. Beside him, Hannibal mounted his own steed.

The chase was over, but the adrenaline still surged through Will's veins like a wildfire. Victory tasted like the wind on his lips, sharp and sweet. They were escaping, leaving the

specter of Luther and his vengeful posse in the dust. For a moment, the weight of the past lifted, and the future unfolded before Will like a parchment waiting to be written.

He dared to dream—a dangerous pursuit in a world where dreams were as fragile as the bones of a sparrow. Louisiana beckoned to him in his mind's eye, a place of tranquility where the bayou murmured secrets to the moon. Hannibal would be there, a vision of poise and serenity on the porch of a weathered homestead.

Will imagined himself returning, the victorious hunter with his bounty in hand. A fish, a creature of the river, caught in the dance of shadows and moonlight. He could almost taste the triumph as he imagined Hannibal's smile, a soft curve that spoke of shared victories and a quiet life well earned.

In his daydreams, they moved in a delicate dance—a harmony of two souls bound by the trials of the West. The image of Hannibal, surrounded by the fragrance of Louisiana blooms, reading a tome of wisdom, filled Will's heart with a warmth he had rarely known. Soft kisses would greet him, promises of a future written in whispers against the canvas of a starlit night.

Will's thoughts drifted to the simple joys—the shared meals, the laughter, the quiet moments of repose. The anticipation of a life unfettered by the shadows that lurked in every corner of the desert. He imagined Hannibal, a maestro in the kitchen, concocting culinary wonders that transcended the harsh reality of their world.

The ride continued, a mad dash towards the dreams that danced on the horizon. Will's heart, once a vessel for violence and bloodshed, now beat to the rhythm of hope. It was a fragile thing, a damnable thing.

He cast a furtive glance over his shoulder, his keen eyes cutting through the darkness. Men on horseback emerged from the shadows, their figures ominous against the desert. Guns raised in unison, they were a manifestation of the unforgiving reality that the West painted on the canvas of their lives.

A flicker of despair danced in Will's eyes as he beheld the unfolding scene. He knew all too well that the pursuit of happy endings was a fool's errand in a world as brutal as the one they inhabited. Yet, despite the gnawing doubt that clawed at his resolve, Will was not a man to be driven by fear.

The air hung heavy with anticipation as the men closed in, the threat of violence echoing louder with each passing moment. The crack of a gunshot ripped through the silence, the bullet slicing through the air with malevolent intent. Will's breath caught in his throat as his eyes widened, fixed on the lethal projectile hurtling toward Hannibal.

In the fractured seconds that felt like an eternity, the world slowed. Will's instincts screamed at him, a primal force urging him to act. He could have ridden away, left Hannibal to the mercy of fate, but that was a path stained with the ink of cowardice. Hannibal was not merely a companion; he was intertwined with Will's essence, a part of his very being.

With a surge of desperation, Will made a split-second decision. He wrenched himself from the saddle, a mid-air ballet that defied the laws of gravity. Time seemed to stretch and twist as he collided with Hannibal, their bodies entwined in a gravity-defying dance. They tumbled towards the unforgiving earth as the bullet grazed the tip of Will's hat, a whisper of death echoing in its wake.

The impact was brutal. Will felt the jarring slam of his body against the hard ground, the shockwaves reverberating through his bones. Pain blossomed like a malevolent flower, tendrils of darkness creeping at the edges of his consciousness. And then, a sickening thud. The world went dark as Will's head collided with a sharp protrusion of rock.

Chapter End Notes

uh oh, we are now in the home stretch. :3 feral will graham coming soon!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

cw - torture, a LOT of killing, slasher Will Graham

Thank you Joel from The Last of Us for being the inspiration for this chapter. Also, thank you guys for reading! It means the world. <3

Will squinted against the blinding light, feeling the oppressive heat cling to him like a second skin. His body ached, and his head throbbed with a dull, persistent pain that reverberated through every fiber of his being.

He shifted on the sun-scorched ground, his movements slow and deliberate. The dry earth beneath him felt coarse, and the grains stuck to his sweat-soaked skin. As he propped himself up on his elbows, a groan escaped his parched lips. The taste of dust lingered in his mouth, a bitter reminder of the night that had left him battered and disoriented.

The remnants of the previous evening's events flickered through Will's mind like a fragmented dream. The town, a solitary outpost amidst the vast emptiness of the desert, loomed in the distance. It mocked him with its stoic presence, a painful reminder of a mission gone awry.

His horse grazed in the distance, seemingly unperturbed by the desolation that surrounded them. Will's eyes followed the animal's movements, and a small, appreciative smile tugged at his lips. "Good girl," he muttered, a raspy whisper that barely carried over the whispering winds.

The scuffed leather of Will's hat lay next to him. He reached for it with deliberate slowness, feeling the worn texture beneath his fingertips. His colt rested nearby. The weight of the gun

felt reassuring in his hand, a familiar touchstone in the wilderness.

The desert stretched out in all directions, a vast sea of ochre and sienna, broken only by occasional clusters of sagebrush and the distant, mirage-like shimmer of heat. Will's mind grappled with the disorienting memories of the night before. Flashes of pain, the unsettling blur of his vision, and the haunting timbre of Hannibal's voice echoed in his consciousness.

His head throbbed anew as he recalled the surreal events that had transpired. Pain, searing and unrelenting, had shot through his skull. The world had tilted on its axis, and he found himself fighting against the darkness that threatened to consume him. Hannibal's voice had reached his ears in disjointed fragments.

"You've finally caught me," he had heard, the words a seductive whisper in the disorienting chaos. "I wanted you to know exactly where I am, and where you can always find me."

Will's fingers brushed against dried flakes of blood caked on his skin. He winced, the touch bringing forth the stinging reality of his injuries. The images in his mind remained fragmented—Hannibal's proximity, the desperate pawing for his gun, and the surge of nausea that threatened to overwhelm him.

He pushed himself to a sitting position, his senses slowly adjusting to the harsh reality of the desert's embrace. The town, with its silent buildings and empty streets, seemed like a ghostly apparition in the noonday heat. Will's mind churned with questions, the answers eluding him like whispers carried away by the ever-present wind.

The image of Hannibal on his knees, hands behind his head, flickered in Will's mind. Surrender, a word laden with both vulnerability and defiance, lingered in the air. Did Hannibal bargain for him? Did his surrender serve as a shield to protect Will from an imminent fate?

A surge of nausea clawed at Will's throat, the fear of the unknown intertwining with the remnants of pain and disorientation. He swallowed hard, the dryness in his mouth exacerbating the ache that reverberated through his body.

He vowed to himself that nothing and no one would take Hannibal from him. Yet, the irony of his life taunted him—the inevitability that everything he held dear would be torn away, just like moth-eaten cloth unraveling at the seams.

Will scrubbed a hand over his face, the touch numb and mechanical. This was his reality, a cycle of loss and longing that seemed written in the stars.

His thoughts swirled in chaotic patterns. Will's life had been a series of tribulations, a relentless journey through the shadows of despair. He recalled the first stirrings of the outbreak, a time when faces he once knew transformed into rotted, grotesque visages of the living dead. The attacks, the desperate screams, and the palpable fear that gripped the hearts of those who witnessed the unraveling of reality—these memories painted a gruesome tableau of a world on the brink.

Yet, in the midst of the chaos, there was one constant, one beacon of unwavering strength—his father. The man who stood resolute against the tide of the unknown, who faced the horrors with a stoic determination that left an indelible mark on Will's soul. His father, a gruff figure shaped by a lifetime of hard work, emerged as a pillar of strength in those days.

Will allowed himself to dwell on the memory of his father—a man of few words, yet a repository of wisdom that transcended the confines of their humble existence. The features of the two men did not align; his father's countenance bore the rugged lines etched by a life of toil, while Will's face mirrored the ghostly visage of a mother he never truly knew.

His father was a vivid presence in Will's recollections. A hard worker who etched out a living from the unyielding soil, a stern figure who imparted lessons with a strict yet loving hand. Will's mind conjured images of warm brown eyes, crinkling at the corners as laughter spilled from his father's lips in response to Will's childish jokes.

A bittersweet smile tugged at the corners of Will's mouth as he retraced the moments of his youth, a time when the world held a simpler, more tangible truth. His father, despite the hardships, had never laid a hand on him in anger before the outbreak. The man's sternness, his unforgiving nature at times, was tempered by a profound kindness and a bond that transcended the boundaries of blood.

His father had been Will's anchor in a world consumed by the flames of an unforgiving outbreak. The lessons imparted by the elder Graham echoed through the caverns of Will's consciousness—the art of fishing, the craftsmanship of lure-making, the physicality of building, the resourcefulness of foraging, the necessity of fighting, and the grim proficiency of killing without remorse.

As Will allowed himself to delve into the recesses of his past, he traced the steps of a young man navigating the treacherous landscape of survival. Seventeen years old, possessed by a blend of fear and courage, Will had volunteered for a mission. The desperation for supplies had driven them deep into the heart of Louisiana—a landscape fraught with danger and the remnants of a world undone.

A cabin, a relic of a time before the outbreak, stood as a solitary sentinel in the desolate expanse. His father, grappling with the weariness that clung to his aging limbs, had hesitated but ultimately conceded to Will’s insistence to be of use. Will, armed with his father's colt and a youthful vigor, stood on the precipice of proving himself in a world where the rules had been rewritten by the merciless hands of fate.

The yearning for self-sufficiency, for a chance to contribute to the survival of their family, fueled Will's determination. He crept towards the cabin, his senses attuned to the eerie stillness that hung in the air like a veil of foreboding. The world outside seemed to hush its breath, and the weight of responsibility pressed upon his young shoulders.

Sunlight filtered through the cabin's windows, casting a dim glow that revealed the fragile state of decay within. The creaking floorboards beneath Will's cautious steps added a disconcerting soundtrack to his exploration.

The silence, broken only by the occasional groan of the decaying structure, wrapped around Will like a suffocating shroud. He believed the cabin to be empty, abandoned to the inexorable passage of time.

A heavy footstep, a sound both incongruous and ominous, pierced the stillness. Will's heart quickened, and he whirled around, the colt raised in a trembling grip. The flickering sunlight danced upon the barrel of the weapon, lending an otherworldly gleam to its surface.

Before him stood a man—a wretched figure caught in the throes of the insidious virus that had claimed so many lives. The man's movements were erratic, an unsettling dance that mirrored the twisted machinations of the affliction that gripped him. His wails, borne of agony and despair, echoed through the dilapidated cabin.

Yet, in the man's eyes, Will glimpsed a fleeting spark of humanity—an imploring gaze that transcended the grotesque exterior. The eyes, wild and alive, bore a silent plea for mercy. It was a paradox, a man trapped between the realms of the living and the damned, his very existence a testament to the capricious nature of the outbreak.

Will's hands shook as he grappled with the weight of a decision that transcended the boundaries of morality. The colt felt heavier than ever in his grip. He saw the suffering etched on the man's face, the silent supplication that begged for release from the torment that had claimed him.

The guttural groans emanating from the man seemed to scrape against the walls of the cabin, a symphony of suffering that grated on Will's ears. His heart quickened, the pulse of life coursing through his veins like a runaway stallion. Frozen in place, the colt gripped in trembling hands, Will stood at the nexus of life and death, where the distinction between the two blurred into an eerie chiaroscuro of existence.

The creature, once a man, twitched violently, a marionette manipulated by the unseen strings of an insidious affliction. Tattered clothes clung to its emaciated form, and veins bulged like grotesque tendrils crawling beneath the ashen skin. A palpable sense of dread hung in the air, the scent of decay mingling with the raw, metallic tang of fear.

As the creature lurched forward, Will's instincts took over. The colt swung into position with swift precision. His eyes, wide and unblinking, tracked the sight unfolding before him. The man—no, the walker—reached out, fingers curling around Will's wrist in a parody of human contact.

A whimper escaped Will's lips, the plaintive sound barely audible over the groans and shuffling movements. He felt the cold grip of terror, tendrils winding their way around his heart. In that moment of paralyzing vulnerability, he believed this was the end. Death, delivered by the gnashing teeth of a once-human abomination, loomed before him.

Wetness trailed down Will's cheeks, the unbidden tears a testament to the profound terror gripping his soul. He didn't register his own weeping, consumed as he was by the horror of the tableau unfolding. The walker's twitching, its feeble attempts at communication through broken moans, resonated in the hollow chamber of Will's consciousness.

Closer it pulled him, closer to the precipice of demise. Will's mind raced, the world narrowing to the grip on his wrist and the abyss of red-rimmed eyes that seemed to implore him for release. In that chilling moment, the walker's silent supplication clawed at the frayed edges of Will's empathy.

Then, with a revelation as stark as the gunshot that followed, it became clear—the walker sought not to inflict harm but to escape the clutches of its own tormented existence. The man, or the vestiges of what he once was, clung to the remnants of humanity within him, a fragile tether to a life slipping away.

The gunshot that echoed within its walls reverberated through his very being, a harbinger of the dark road he was fated to tread. The walker, a tortured soul seeking release, fell to the cold floor in the aftermath of Will's mercy.

Amidst the scene, tears mingled with the spatters of blood on Will's face, tracing silent paths of sorrow. He sniffled and rubbed his nose with a sleeve, the gritty sensation of dried blood smearing across his smooth skin. The stench of death hung heavy in the air, an olfactory reminder of the world's decay. It was a baptism of sorts, a rite of passage into the desolate reality that awaited beyond the cabin's threshold.

His father burst into the cabin, eyes wide and searching. The relief in his gaze upon finding Will alive was fleeting, replaced by a searching intensity that betrayed an unspoken understanding. In that fleeting exchange, the elder Graham saw the transformation in his son —a metamorphosis wrought by the cruelty of a world that demanded resilience at the cost of innocence.

Will's father knew that vulnerability was a luxury, one his son could no longer afford. The whimsical, playful heart that had once defined Will's essence now lay torn open and bleeding, exposed to the harsh realities of survival. The father's love was both a shield and a blade, a paradoxical force that sought to protect Will from the corrosive influence of a world steeped in darkness.

In an act born of a desperate paternal love, Will's father barrelled forward. The wide eyes that had once crinkled with laughter now bore the weight of a grim resolve. He wrenched the colt away from Will's grip, his movements swift and unyielding. A slap across the face resounded through the cabin, a visceral punctuation to a painful truth.

"Stupid boy," his father growled, the words etched with a sorrow that transcended anger. In that moment, Will stood at the crossroads of his own innocence, a precipice from which he could no longer retreat. His father's voice, once a source of comfort, now commanded him to "buck the fuck up and get a move on."

Will felt the sting of his father's disappointment, a wound that cut deeper than any physical injury. The words were a bitter salve, a remedy intended to scar over the tender vulnerability that threatened to consume Will from within. The cowboy's heart, once a canvas painted with the hues of childhood, now bore the indelible mark of a harsh reality—a reality that demanded the shedding of sentiment and the donning of an armor woven from the fibers of stoicism.

With the slap and the stinging rebuke, Will's father became both the architect and executioner of his son's transformation. The innocence that lingered in the boy's eyes dissipated like morning mist in the face of a relentless sun. Will knew that he could no longer be the kind, silly, sensitive boy of yesteryears. The world had claimed those fragments of his identity, leaving behind a hardened soul destined to navigate the desolation that lay ahead.

In the aftermath of the altercation, Will didn't dwell on the why or the how. He simply obeyed. Buck the fuck up and get a move on.

The ceaseless journey through the expanse of the West had stripped away layers of Will's humanity. The memories of his father, the decaying cabin, and the ever-revolving carousel of death lingered like ghosts in the shadows of his mind.

Amidst the vast emptiness, his solitary figure rode, haunted by the echoes of his own past. Will's heart, once a battleground of conflicting emotions, harbored a numbness—an armor forged in the crucible of survival. The colt, his father's legacy, dangled from his side like a silent companion, a constant reminder of the harsh truths etched into his very being.

Then came Hannibal.

A force of nature, a specter of darkness, Hannibal emerged from the periphery of Will's existence like an unforeseen storm. The cowboy's life, already a tapestry woven with the threads of sorrow, was further unravelled by the stranger. In the eyes of Hannibal, Will found a reflection of his own fractured soul, a kindred spirit in the desolation.

Yet, in the dance of their entwined fates, tenderness emerged. Hannibal, a creature both beautiful and menacing, held a knife to Will's throat even as he tended to the wounds that marred the cowboy's heart. The paradox of their connection was a precarious balance, a tightrope walk between trust and trepidation.

Caring for Hannibal became a revelation—a vulnerability that echoed through the canyons of Will's guarded heart. In the tender moments, when skin met skin and lips met lips, Will felt the stirrings of a sentiment he had long deemed extinguished. Alive, alive, alive—the refrain echoed in the recesses of his consciousness like a distant hymn.

Yet, despite the warmth, tendrils of doubt slithered through the cracks of Will's consciousness. He couldn't fully trust his hand in Hannibal's care. The scars of a lifetime haunted him—the memories of the walker in the cabin, the desperate plea in his father's eyes. The vulnerability that love demanded was a frightening prospect, an uncharted territory that Will navigated with a cautious heart.

Tenderness, a tender thing, was a double-edged blade. In giving himself to Hannibal, Will exposed the tender underbelly of his battered soul. Yet, even in the face of fear and uncertainty, he felt a pulse—a heartbeat that resonated with a newfound vitality. He had given his body, his mind, his soul, and received in equal measure. For the first time since he was a boy, Will felt.

Hannibal surrendered. A creature of darkness, a force that had taken lives with the same ease as drawing breath, gave himself willingly for Will's sake. In that sacrificial act, echoes of Will's father resounded—a man who had surrendered himself years ago for the protection of his son.

God is wicked, Will mused. The divine or the malevolent, whichever force governed the universe, had orchestrated a cruel symphony that entwined their fates.

It should have been *me* , Will thought. Instead, Hannibal had bargained for his safety, offering himself as a sacrificial lamb in the cosmic game of survival. The tendrils of hope, that damnable thing, had ensnared Will's heart. It gripped him with claws of uncertainty, tearing his heart out and leaving it somewhere in Deadwood.

Will made his way toward his horse with a slow, limping gait, every step accompanied by the throbbing pain in his head. He reached her and murmured, "Good girl," as he patted her flank, a small token of gratitude for a creature that had been his silent confidante.

With a practiced hand, Will retrieved his belongings from the saddle, the leather creaking in protest. Among the items, his fingers found a familiar weight—the Sorrows of Young Werther, a book that held a significance beyond its literary value. It was Hannibal's book. Their book.

The leather-bound book, weathered by the elements, felt cool in Will's hands. He traced the embossed letters with his fingertips, an act that summoned memories of shared moments with Hannibal. The words from the book whispered in his mind, a passage that Hannibal had once read with him, their voices blending in a quiet harmony.

"What is the world to our hearts without love? What is a magic-lantern without light? You have but to kindle the flame within, and the brightest figures shine on the white wall; and, if love only show us fleeting shadows, we are yet happy, when, like mere children, we behold them, and are transported with the splendid phantoms."

The words resonated with a profound truth that transcended the pages of a book. Will's heart had found its counterpart in the darkness that enveloped Hannibal. The analogy of the teacup came to mind—the broken pieces of their lives, their pasts, and their souls had melded together, fitting seamlessly like a puzzle. The teacup had come together.

He felt a sting behind his eyelids, an unfamiliar moisture that threatened to betray the stoic facade he wore. Will blinked against the harsh sunlight, the tears that dared to well up remained unshed.

His fingers ran over the worn edges of the book, the leather telling tales of the journey it had undertaken alongside its owners. Will's gaze drifted toward the horizon, where the desert met the sky in an unbroken expanse. The question lingered in his mind—what is the world to his heart without love?

The realization washed over Will like a slow, rising tide—an awareness that crept into the recesses of his soul, filling the empty spaces with a profound truth. Love, that elusive and powerful force, had taken residence within him. It wasn't a sudden revelation, no thunderclap or lightning strike, but a quiet acknowledgment that whispered through the arid winds of the desert.

Will grappled with the simplicity of the truth. Love. The word lingered in his mind, a soft melody amidst the harsh symphony of the West. He almost felt foolish for not admitting it sooner, for not unraveling the complexities of his own heart.

This tenderness, this softness that made him feel exposed like a bloodied piece of meat, was love. It wasn't the kind of love found in the pages of dime novels or the fleeting encounters in dusty saloons. It was a love that demanded bones, blood, tissues—the very essence of Hannibal. Will wanted to hold Hannibal until time itself stripped away the layers, leaving nothing but the bare, unadorned skeleton.

In the heat of Hannibal's touch, Will had found a sanctuary, a campfire that mocked the harshness of the sun. It promised warmth, sustenance, and care. With Hannibal, Will saw a future unfolding, a thousand years where the passage of time would become inconsequential. He yearned to hold Hannibal, to feel the pulse of their entwined fates beating against the rhythms of the world.

This was love, Will realized—an emotion raw and pure, unburdened by the pretenses of the harsh reality that surrounded them. The anger, the feigned hate, the violent dance with knives, the spilled blood, and the lingering bruises—all of it had been love. Love, wrapped in the cloak of brutality, hiding beneath the veneer of their tempestuous encounters.

Hannibal, the demanding creature who walked the fine line between selfishness and cruelty, had yearned to be Will's. In the moments of starvation, both physical and emotional, Hannibal had wanted to be the sustenance that filled the void. Hannibal had knelt at his feet, debased before the altar of Will's affection.

In the symbiotic dance of their connection, Hannibal had shown a vulnerability reserved for Will alone. Behind the veneer of strength and dominance, there was a fragility that belonged only to their shared world. They were like rabid wolves, skittish and wild, but instead of tearing each other apart, they had allowed each other entry.

The thought was a bittersweet pang in Will's chest. Will understood now the terror that Hannibal must have felt—two creatures so accustomed to the shadows, allowing someone else into the darkness. The exposure, the sharing of their innermost selves—it had been an act of courage for both of them.

And now, Hannibal was gone. The truth hung in the air like a ghost, a specter of the connection that had once defined their existence. Will's heart, now a vessel filled with the void left in Hannibal's absence, ached with the weight of loss.

He had always been a runner, a man who sought solace in the relentless rhythm of hooves against the earth. Yet, when Hannibal had entered his life, he had found something worth staying for. And now, as he faced the harsh reality of Hannibal's absence, Will vowed not to run.

His mind echoed with the haunting memories of his past, of a time when he had run from his father, from grief, and from the fear of being alone. But now, with Hannibal gone, he refused to let another sacrifice be made for his sake. Fate had held him in its grip for far too long, and now, with Hannibal as his reason, he would defy the hands that guided his destiny.

Possession had always been a part of Will's nature. He was an uncaring man, but when it came to what belonged to him, he became unyielding. Hannibal had declared himself as Will's, and in the vast emptiness of the West, where the rules were as elusive as the horizon, Will would not allow another to steal what was rightfully his.

His pulse throbbed in his temples, a steady reminder that life still coursed through his veins. It made no logical sense, but Will knew that as long as his heart beat, Hannibal was alive. They had become like Dante and Virgil, navigating the circles of their own inferno.

Anger simmered within Will, a fierce flame that burned brighter than the scorching sun overhead. How dare anyone take Hannibal from him? How dare they lay undeserving hands on the flesh of a god, a touch that only Will had the right to claim?

Will remembered one of the tales Hannibal had told him—Cerberus, the mythical guardian of the Underworld. Hannibal had cast himself as Hades, the lord of the realm beneath, and Will, not Persephone, but Cerberus, the three-headed hound that guarded the gates of the abyss.

Cerberus, a vile creature with multiple heads, stood as a guardian, a sentinel against the trespassers seeking entry into the Underworld. Each of his heads, snarling and vicious, guarded the entrance to the realm of the dead. Hannibal's words had painted a vivid picture of a beast both feared and respected, a creature bound to the depths by an unbreakable bond of loyalty.

In this tale, Will was not the one to be wooed or lured into the depths by the lord of the Underworld. Instead, he embodied the guardian, the monstrous figure that ensured the sanctity of the dark realm. He was Cerberus, a creature of rage and duty, tasked with keeping the living from crossing into the land of the dead.

The guardian with multiple heads found himself severed, cut in a cruel act that defied the very essence of his being. Yet, unlike the mortal wound one might expect, each cut, each injury inflicted upon him only resulted in the proliferation of new heads. The very nature of Cerberus was to regenerate, to multiply in the face of adversity.

The symbolism was not lost on Will. As Hannibal, his Hades, was torn from him, leaving a void that echoed with the absence of a once-shared existence, Will felt the wrath of a beast betrayed. His rage threatened to consume him. The tenderness he had grown for Hannibal had been callously stripped away.

Hannibal, the lord of the Underworld in this narrative, had been taken from him. A hole, a void in the shape of Hannibal, yawned within Will's chest. Nobody else could fit into this space. Why would he want them to? The notion of another attempting to occupy the space meant for Hannibal elicited a visceral reaction—a rejection born not out of choice but necessity.

Will grappled with the enormity of his rage. He had given his heart, his soul, and in return, they had taken it away.

The notion of scattering Hannibal's atoms across the universe, of obliterating any trace of his existence, crossed Will's mind. But even in this seething rage, he knew it to be an impossibility. Scatter the atoms, disperse them like ashes in the wind, and still, Will would know Hannibal's name.

The cowboy, Will, stood at the edge of the unforgiving landscape, his eyes like two flint stones, cold and unyielding. As the winds whispered through the sagebrush, a silent promise of vengeance echoed within him.

Closing his eyes, Will allowed the visions to flood in. Massacres. Blood. Torn flesh. Agony. The stoic cowboy, an emblem of ruthless determination, asserted its dominance over the man. His emotions were buried deep, entombed beneath layers of grit and resolve. Will was no longer a man; he had become a force of nature, a tempest of violence wrapped in a cowboy's guise.

Dreams of retribution unfolded in the recesses of his mind. Luther and his men, faces etched with malice, would pay for the transgressions committed against him. Will's heart now beat with the rhythmic cadence of merciless intent. He would hunt, he would kill, and every last one of them would feel the wrath of the cowboy scorned.

His hat, weathered and worn, shielded his eyes from the sunlight. Will adjusted it, wincing as the movement sent a pang of pain through the cut on his head.

No feelings. No emotion. Merciless. Uncaring. Trust had become a distant memory, a luxury afforded to those who hadn't stared into the abyss of their own darkness. Will was selfish, driven by a singular purpose—to reclaim what had been taken from him, to retrieve the devil he had lost.

The cowboy's hand moved with purpose, sliding Hannibal's book back into its pouch. Determination radiated from him like heat waves on the desert floor. He would return the book, a promise made to a love lost but not forgotten.

As he walked, the cowboy's mind became a battlefield of strategy. Luther's group was a formidable foe, and Deadwood, a town teeming with shadows and whispers, held the answers he sought.

The wooden door to the general store swung open with a creak, announcing Will's entrance like a distant roll of thunder. His eyes, hardened orbs of determination, scanned the interior, seeking out the means to arm himself against the demons that had taken Hannibal. The air in the store, thick with the scent of leather, gunpowder, and dry goods, seemed to respond to Will's urgency.

The general store revealed its wares with a cold indifference. Barrels of grain stood tall, sacks of flour lined the shelves.. Will, however, sought a different kind of sustenance – the kind that came from the cold steel of a blade.

His eyes swept over the walls, scouring for a glint of metal that could serve as a surrogate for the knife now held captive by Luther's gang. The weight of the loss rested heavily on Will's shoulders, but his resolve only strengthened.

Curses escaped Will's lips as the store proved barren of the weapon he sought. A low growl rumbled in his throat, a primal sound that resonated with the frustration of a predator denied its prey. But a cowboy, resilient in the face of adversity, adapts. Will turned on his boot heels, making his way towards the carpentry shop, where rusted tools held the promise of makeshift weaponry.

The carpentry shop greeted Will with the scent of aged wood and the echoes of countless projects long forgotten. Tools, some dull and others rusted to the point of neglect, hung on the walls like trophies of a bygone era. The cowboy's eyes glittered with a fierce determination as he assessed the array of implements before him.

His gaze landed on a rusted old socket chisel, its blade showing signs of wear but still retaining a sharp edge. Will picked it up, the weight and grip feeling unfamiliar in his hand compared to his knife.

A grin, more feral than joyful, spread across Will's face. The socket chisel might lack the intimacy of his knife, but it would become an extension of his will – a crude instrument of

retribution. Will stepped out of the carpentry shop, the door swinging shut behind him with a hollow thud.

Will's boots crunched on the gravel as he made his way towards his horse.

At the side of his horse, Will reached into the pouch on his saddle and retrieved a handful of bullets. The colt awaited its moment of reckoning. With a practiced hand, Will reloaded, each metallic click a testament to the rhythm of his determination.

He mounted his horse, and as the animal rose beneath him, Will turned its head towards the direction of Deadwood.

The moon hung high in the indigo sky, casting a dim glow over the vast expanse of the West. Will's horse moved steadily beneath him as they approached Deadwood, a town that seemed to defy the relentless advance of the undead that plagued the world. Lanterns flickered in the distance, their warm glow contrasting with the darkness that enveloped the landscape.

Will's stomach growled, a painful reminder of the hunger that gnawed at him. He had been riding for hours, the rhythmic sound of hooves against the dirt echoing through the quiet night. The scent of dust and dry earth lingered in the air, carried by a gentle breeze that whispered through the sparse vegetation.

Deadwood loomed ahead, a cluster of ramshackle buildings that stood defiant against the decay that had consumed much of the frontier. The town seemed to pulse with life, the sounds of laughter and conversation drifting through the night. It was a facade, a deceptive illusion that masked the true nature of the place.

As Will approached, he could see the signs of recent construction. Wooden planks were nailed haphazardly to the buildings, attempting to mend the damage inflicted by time and neglect. Nails protruded at odd angles, giving the structures a patchwork appearance. It was a feeble attempt at rebuilding, a struggle against the inevitable decay that surrounded them.

The scent of smoke wafted through the air, carrying with it the acrid smell of charred meat. Will's jaw clenched at the realization that the townsfolk were likely engaged in the practice of cannibalism. Deadwood had earned its reputation as a vile place, a haven for those who had succumbed to the darkness that had swept through the land.

Despite the apparent liveliness of the town, Will knew better than to trust the illusion. The people of Deadwood were predators, preying on the weak and the vulnerable. Women, children—none were spared from the insatiable hunger that drove them to commit unspeakable acts. Deadwood had become a breeding ground for savagery, a twisted reflection of the world that had succumbed to the virus.

Will's grip tightened on the reins as he guided his horse closer to the outskirts of town. He could feel the tension in the air, a silent warning that spoke of danger lurking beneath the facade of normalcy. The uneven clatter of footsteps on the wooden boardwalk echoed through the night, accompanied by occasional bursts of laughter that sent shivers down Will's spine.

Dismounting his horse, Will issued a soft command, "Stay, girl," his words barely audible in the quietude of the night. The mare snorted, a sound of understanding, as if she sensed the gravity of the mission that lay ahead. Will's fingers grazed the cold metal of his Colt.

With purpose, he gathered what he needed. The brim of his hat was pulled low, casting a shadow over his steely eyes. Will moved with a determined stride. He spared no time, removing the spurs from his boots and securing them.

The night embraced him as he walked, guided by a sense that transcended mere intuition. Every step carried a weight of purpose, a magnetic pull drawing him closer to Hannibal. Will felt a connection, an inexplicable link that threaded through the darkness like a whisper in the wind. Hannibal's name echoed in his mind, intertwined with the rhythmic beating of his heart.

As he approached the town's perimeter, Will saw shadows cast by those who guarded Deadwood. The figures were vigilant, their watchful eyes scanning the darkness for any sign of intrusion. Will crouched low, his movements calculated and deliberate. He knew he had to evade their watchful gaze for now.

In the cover of the night, Will began to weave through the outskirts of Deadwood. The town sprawled before him, a labyrinth of structures that held both secrets and dangers. Will's eyes narrowed as he tried to discern the best route, but Deadwood seemed to resist any attempts at strategic planning.

Ducking behind a dilapidated wall, Will cursed silently as he heard footsteps approaching. The rhythmic cadence of unhurried steps reached his ears, signaling the presence of a sentry. He clenched his jaw, feeling the weight of the moment pressing upon him. This was the first hurdle, the test of his ability to navigate the unseen perils that lurked in the night.

With a determined breath, Will steeled himself and stepped out from behind the wall just as the sentry drew near. In an instant, he seized the unsuspecting man, his arm wrapping around his throat like a vice.

The man's eyes widened with alarm, and he gasped for air as Will exerted pressure, his fingers digging into the vulnerable flesh. Will's face remained impassive, a scowl etched across his features. The struggle was brief but intense. The sentry clawed at Will's arm, desperate for release, but the inexorable grip tightened until the man went limp.

Will released the lifeless body, the thud of it hitting the ground muffled by the stillness of the night. He retreated, slipping back behind the wall, his senses heightened.

His path took him to the periphery of the town, where another pair of footsteps approached, their pace quickening as the sentry sensed something amiss. Will's instincts guided him as he stepped out again, this time wielding the butt of his gun with swift precision.

The second man, caught off guard, let out an alarmed curse as the hard impact connected with his head. He crumpled to the ground, unconscious and vulnerable.

Will's boots scuffed against the debris-strewn floor as he took a step back, a harsh breath escaping his lips. The captive groaned, stirring from the forced slumber that Will had plunged him into. The man blinked through swollen eyes, disoriented and trapped in a nightmare of his own making. Will's eyes, shaded by the brim of his hat, bore into the man's very soul.

He withdrew the chisel from his belt, the glint of its blade a harbinger of pain. The room's air seemed to thicken with the tension as Will approached, the subtle creak of the floorboards beneath his weight betraying the stealth he had employed to bring the man here. The chisel found its place in Will's firm grip.

"Where the hell is Hannibal?" Will's voice, cold and laced with a promise of retribution, echoed in the desolate space. The man's eyes widened in fear, recognizing the name.

"I... I don't know no Hannibal," the man stammered, his voice shaky and broken. Will's scowl deepened.

Will stepped forward, looming over the captive. The chisel glinted in the dim light, a silent reminder of the agony it could inflict. "You're lyin'," Will growled, his hand reaching out to grip the man's hair, yanking his head upward. "You're gonna tell me where he is, or you'll beg for death before I'm through."

The man's eyes darted in panic, searching for an escape that didn't exist. "I swear, I don't know where he is!" he pleaded, his voice trembling. Will's patience wore thin, the memories of the past colliding with the urgency of the present.

With a swift motion, Will brought the chisel to the man's kneecap. The blade punctured the flesh with a sickening sound, and the man's agonized scream pierced the night. Will's grip on the man's hair tightened, a vicious scowl etched onto his features.

"Focus, you son of a bitch!" Will spat, his breath hot against the man's face. "Hannibal. Where is he?"

The man writhed in pain, his pleas mixing with the echoes of tortured souls that seemed to linger in the air. His eyes, wide with terror, met Will's gaze. "I swear, I don't—"

Will interrupted him with a ruthless twist of the chisel, eliciting another scream. The raw power, the unbridled control over another man's suffering, ignited a flame within Will—a flame that danced between righteousness and the darkness that lurked within his own soul.

"Talk, damn it!" Will demanded, the lines of morality blurring in the crimson haze of retribution. The man, broken and bleeding, sobbed as he struggled to form coherent words.

"He... he was with the others," the man finally confessed, his voice a mere whisper. Will's eyes narrowed, the revelation sparking a new urgency. "Prisoners. We were keepin' 'em for meat."

Will's jaw clenched, the horror of the revelation settling like a bitter taste in his mouth. "Others? What damn others?" he barked, his grip on the chisel relenting slightly. The man gasped for breath, seizing the opportunity to provide the information Will sought.

"The stables, further down town," the man wheezed, his eyes pleading for mercy. "He was with 'em one second, then he was gone. Escaped. I ain't lyin', I swear on my mama's grave."

Will released his grip on the man's hair, allowing his head to fall back against the chair.

Hannibal, alive and well, hidden among the shadows of the town, was a beacon of hope in the sea of despair. A surge of adrenaline coursed through Will's veins, his heart pounding like the hooves of a runaway stallion. The darkness seemed to intensify around him as the weight of the information settled.

"I believe you," Will declared, his voice low and menacing. The man's eyes widened in a mixture of relief and fear, realizing that survival hung by the thinnest of threads. Before the captive could comprehend the turn of fate, Will thrust the chisel into his chest with a swift, deliberate motion.

A tortured scream pierced the air as the blade found its mark. Will leaned in, his eyes locking onto the dying embers of the man's soul. He felt the warmth of blood seeping onto his hands,

a visceral connection to the brutality that unfolded in the name of justice. The sensation sent shivers down Will's spine, a mixture of horror and exhilaration intertwining like serpents in the pit of his stomach.

With a shaky breath, Will withdrew the tool, the squelching sound of tearing flesh resonating in the decaying building. The man convulsed in agony, his life slipping away with each desperate gasp. Will's hands trembled, stained with the evidence of a choice made in the crucible of desperation. It felt like dancing on the edge of morality, where right and wrong merged into a distorted waltz.

Outside, the muffled sounds of voices and footsteps reached a crescendo. Will's head snapped up, his senses heightened by the impending threat. The element of surprise had been sacrificed on the altar of vengeance. Will cursed under his breath, a primal growl escaping his lips. He tightened his grip on the chisel, a silent vow to meet the oncoming storm with the fury of a tempest.

The door swung open with a force that rattled the frail building. Will's eyes narrowed as figures emerged in the doorway, silhouetted against the flickering moonlight.

Without a moment's hesitation, Will lunged forward, the chisel becoming an extension of his wrath. The first man to cross his path met the unforgiving blade in a lethal dance of steel. The chisel sank into the man's neck, the gurgling sounds of his demise swallowed by the night. He sprinted out of the building, the taste of impending battle thick in the air.

Before Will could react, a small axe arced through the darkness, its wicked blade glinting ominously. Instinct took over, and Will moved with the fluid grace of a predator, narrowly evading the lethal swings that sought to find their mark.

Ducking and weaving through the night, Will danced with death as the axe whistled through the air. The assailant, fueled by desperation and the madness that seemed to permeate the very air of the forsaken town, pressed his relentless assault. Will, however, proved elusive.

A surge of adrenaline coursed through Will's veins as he seized an opportunity. With a swift motion, he lunged forward, the chisel finding its mark in the man's thigh. A cry of pain echoed, but Will wasn't done. The blade sought a new destination, plunging into the man's stomach as he recoiled in agony.

Will's boots thudded against the uneven ground as he broke away from the fray, his senses on high alert. The man he had wounded pursued him with a relentless determination that bordered on the unnatural.

The pursuer, fueled by a mix of pain and rage, closed the distance once more. Will turned to face his adversary. The chisel, stained with the blood of its previous victim, found a new target as Will struck, aiming for the man's chest.

A guttural cry tore through the night as the blade penetrated flesh, leaving a trail of crimson in its wake. Will, breathless and battered, withdrew the chisel, his eyes locked with the man he had wounded.

The wounded man refused to yield. Will's hand, steady despite the turmoil within, reached for the axe. The cold metal of the weapon found its place in Will's grasp, a tool that had once been wielded against him now turned in his favor.

With a swift and practiced motion, Will swung the axe, its arc cutting through the night like a vengeful omen. The blade collided with the man's torso, the impact sending shockwaves through both their bodies. A chorus of curses and the sickening sound of steel meeting flesh reverberated in the night.

Yet, as the man crumpled to the ground, the echoes of his demise were drowned out by a sudden and unexpected surge. A rush of energy, electric and intoxicating, coursed through Will's entire being. The sensation, a strange fusion of pain and pleasure, sent shivers down his spine.

The night had turned into a deadly game of cat and mouse as Will darted through the labyrinthine buildings of the town. Yells echoed behind him, a chorus of pursuers closing in on the elusive cowboy. His boots pounded against the wooden floorboards, each step an urgent heartbeat in the symphony of chaos.

In a dimly lit corridor, Will spotted a door to his right and pushed himself through it, his breath coming in ragged gasps. The air was thick with tension as someone shouted that Will

had run into the building. The cowboy's instincts kicked in, and without a moment's hesitation, he ducked out a nearby window and rolled to the ground below.

Will sprang to his feet, adrenaline coursing through his veins like wildfire. His eyes scanned the area, and he spotted a wooden fence nearby. With a curse, he sprinted toward it, hoisting himself over the barrier with a deftness born of survival. A bullet zipped through the air, narrowly missing Will's head, as he rolled behind a nearby wagon for cover.

His colt in hand, Will crouched low, his senses on high alert. The unmistakable sound of footsteps resonated as his pursuers closed in. Peeking from behind the wagon, Will took aim and fired a single shot, the report of the colt splitting the night.

The bullet found its mark, and one of the approaching figures crumpled to the ground with a pained cry. Before the echoes of the gunfire could fade, Will shifted his aim, firing another precise shot that silenced a second pursuer. Bullets whizzed past him as Will hunkered down.

With a swift motion, Will rose from behind the wagon and sprinted to the left, his boots kicking up dust as he sought refuge.

Determined to shake off his pursuers, Will spotted a stone on the ground. In a calculated move, he picked it up and hurled it against a wall in the opposite direction of his escape. The clatter of the stone echoed through the night, drawing attention away from Will's path. Footsteps and yells followed the false trail, leaving a momentary respite for the cowboy.

Will’s boots pounded against the uneven ground, each step a desperate heartbeat in the rhythm of chaos that surrounded him. The pathways, a tangle of buildings and shadows, seemed to twist and morph with each turn, a reflection of the disarray within the cowboy's mind.

Rounding the corner of a dilapidated building, Will's eyes scanned the landscape for a refuge. His breaths came in ragged gasps, the air tainted with the stench of decay and desperation.

A wheelbarrow, forgotten and rusted, appeared as a modest sanctuary. Will, seizing the opportunity, ducked behind its makeshift cover as voices rang out in every direction. The

pursuers, ignorant of his precise location, scanned the town with an air of uncertainty.

Peering over the edge of the wheelbarrow, Will's keen eyes spotted a lone figure, a man oblivious to the lurking danger. The Colt found its way into his steady grip again. The report of a gunshot shattered the stillness.

The bullet found its mark, striking the man's leg, and a cry of pain pierced the night. The man, his weapon dropping to the ground, crumpled under the impact. Seizing the opportunity, Will surged forward, the axe gleaming in his grasp.

With a swing, the axe cleaved through the air, aimed at the man's torso. A sickening snap reverberated through the night as the handle splintered in two. Curses hung in the air as Will discarded the broken remnants, the weapon reduced to a useless relic.

Undeterred, the cowboy drew forth his chisel. In a swift and merciless motion, the chisel found its mark, plunging into the man's neck. A gurgle of agony accompanied the sickening thud as the man crumpled to the ground.

Will took a deep breath, the air thick with the stench of blood and gunpowder. The cowboy's gaze scanned the horizon, seeking escape from the relentless pursuit that echoed through the twisted pathways.

Voices reverberated behind him. His senses, attuned to the chaos, guided him to another wagon, an improvised escape route.

With the agility of a predator, Will scaled the wagon, climbing its wooden frame until he reached the rooftop of a nearby building. He crawled stealthily. A controlled descent brought him to the other side, boots landing with a muffled thud.

His descent marked the beginning of a new confrontation. Gunfire rang out as Will engaged two men who emerged from the shadows. The colt barked with deadly intent. A shot found its mark, felling one of the assailants. The other, undeterred, closed in on Will with an unyielding determination.

A punch collided with the man's face, the impact punctuated by a sickening thud. The cowboy's movements were a dance of brutality as he retaliated, a visceral expression of the relentless will to survive. The man crumpled to the ground, and Will, consumed by a relentless rage, stomped on his head with a violence that echoed through the night.

The air, now thick with the acrid scent of gunpowder and blood, bore witness to Will's ruthless determination. The cowboy's gaze, however, remained fixed on the task at hand. The pursuit of Hannibal fueled Will's relentless resolve.

Ducking behind the corner of a building, Will's heart pounded in his chest as the voices of his pursuers intensified. Men barked orders, proclaiming the presence of a trespasser, igniting a sense of urgency within the cowboy. The words—“looking for two” and "prisoner just got out"—sent a surge of hope coursing through Will's veins.

Hannibal. The name echoed in the recesses of Will's mind, a beacon of possibility amidst the chaos. Where was he? The question lingered, its answer veiled in uncertainty.

A small house beckoned to Will like a siren's call. He sprinted towards it, his boots pounding against the weathered ground, each step echoing the urgency that fueled his pursuit. The door creaked open with a reluctant groan as Will barreled inside, the darkness of the interior embracing him.

Navigating through the narrow corridors, Will's eyes darted around. His gaze settled on the staircase, a rickety structure that led to the upper floor—a vantage point that promised a momentary respite. As he ascended, the wooden steps groaned beneath his weight, a testament to the age of the dwelling.

The bedroom greeted Will as he reached the top. With a swift motion, he slid under the bed. The cowboy's breaths came in measured exhales as he stilled himself, awaiting the inevitable pursuit.

Footsteps approached, a rhythmic cadence that reverberated in the air. Will's eyes, fixated on the space beneath the bed, narrowed with focus. As the silhouette of a man materialized in

the doorway, Will reacted with predatory instinct. His colt barked as the bullets found their mark in the intruder's legs.

The wounded man collapsed with a cry. Will wasted no time, seizing the opportunity presented by the fallen adversary. Another gun lay within arm's reach, dropped in the throes of agony. Will's fingers closed around it, the cold metal a familiar comfort in his hands.

Sliding out from under the bed, Will's eyes scanned the room, assessing the threats that lingered beyond the confines of his makeshift fortress. Another intruder, drawn by the commotion, approached cautiously. Will fired once more, the bullet finding its mark in the man.

The cowboy rose as he placed the other gun in his belt. He ducked and weaved, navigating the space with the precision of a seasoned gunslinger. The aged floorboards creaked beneath his boots as he moved towards the windows, a strategic retreat from the immediate danger that lurked outside.

An old lantern lay forgotten on the floor. Will's fingers closed around it, the glass warm from the residual heat of its dormant flame. A plan formed in the cowboy's mind, a calculated gamble that relied on the element of surprise.

Climbing out a back window, Will found himself on the roof, the wood hot against his palms. Making himself one with the shadows, he flattened his body against the uneven surface, his gaze fixed on the scene unfolding below. A man, unsuspecting, walked past the house, unaware that his destiny hung precariously in the balance.

In one fluid motion, Will rose, the lantern sailing through the night air like a comet. The glass shattered on impact, a burst that marked the beginning of the cowboy's descent. He leaped, the chisel in hand, and collided with the unsuspecting man.

The moment hung in suspense, the outcome uncertain. The chisel, however, betrayed its master, breaking upon impact as it slid into the man’s flesh. Will cursed, the frustration etched on his face as he searched the fallen man for any means of retribution. His fingers closed around the hilt of a knife, a glimmer of triumph in the depths of adversity.

Will, wild and bloodied, threaded through the pathways once more. The paths, like a maze of fate, guided him through twists and turns, each jump over obstacles a dance with the unknown.

Power surged through him, an intoxicating elixir that coursed through his veins. It was a sensation of newfound life, the kind of vitality that only emerged in the crucible of chaos. The air crackled with tension, and Will reveled in the symphony of his own heartbeat, a primal drumbeat that underscored his pursuit.

Hannibal's words echoed in his mind—prophecies of beauty in the brutality. As he ran, Will couldn't help but feel the truth in those words. There was a certain grace in the dance of survival, an elegance that transcended the blood and the grime that adorned him. For the first time, Will felt beautiful, not in the conventional sense, but in the raw, unbridled essence of existence.

He rounded a corner, his momentum carrying him into the path of another man. The man raised his hands, the moonlight revealing the fear etched on his face. He knelt, a supplicant before the bloodied cowboy, and pleaded for mercy.

"Mercy?" the man stammered, his voice a tremor in the silent night. "I beg you, stranger. Spare me."

Will's eyes, bloodshot and wild, bore into the man. The echo of his own humanity, a distant memory, wrestled with the primal urges that sought dominance. He remembered Louisiana, the swamps and the morality that had defined those humid nights. Yet, the hunger for survival drowned out the echoes of a bygone era.

"Mercy?" Will repeated, the word tasting foreign on his lips. "You think mercy lives here?" His voice, a gravelly growl, hinted at the beast that lay beneath the surface.

Will's grip tightened on the colt, a reflection of the tightening grip of the darkness around his heart. The gunshot shattered the night, and the man fell, his plea silenced in a spray of crimson.

Will's breaths came in ragged gasps as he traversed the labyrinth of this sprawling town again, a place that seemed to expand with each stride. The night, now his ally and accomplice, veiled him in shadows as he vaulted over yet another fence. The sprawling town had become a confusing sprawl of dilapidated buildings, twisted pathways, and hidden corners.

The relentless pursuit of Hannibal, a pursuit that had taken on an almost mythical quality, fueled Will's every move. He couldn't fathom how a place could become such a maze of danger and deception. Yet, the town seemed to shift and morph, its twisted design a reflection of the chaos that now gripped it.

As Will ducked behind a corner, the night bore witness to the convergence of two more men, their voices carrying through the stillness. They bemoaned the need for an excessive number of men to handle what they dismissed as "two goddamn people." A smirk played on Will's lips as he peered around the corner, his colt finding its mark.

The gunshots rang out. The two men fell, their voices silenced, and Will rose from his concealed position.

The stables loomed before Will, a beacon of both hope and dread. His heart quickened at the thought of finding Hannibal within those weathered walls.

The stench hit him before he even breached the door, a putrid cocktail of sweat, fear, and desperation that clawed at his senses. Will crashed into the entrance, the door creaking under the impact. His eyes swept the dimly lit space, pupils dilating in the gloom. Rows of pens revealed themselves, each containing a living nightmare—people, their faces etched with the weariness of captivity.

His breath caught as he took in the sight—women, men, and, dreadfully, children, their small frames marred by the harshness of their surroundings. The chains that bound them to the walls clinked softly, a chorus of misery that resonated within the cramped space. Will's chest tightened, the ghost of empathy surfacing, urging him to feel the weight of their suffering.

He shook himself from the momentary paralysis, eyes scanning the pens with desperation. A wild hope flared within him, a flicker of possibility that Hannibal might be among these

prisoners. The desperation that clung to the air fueled Will's urgency as he searched for any sign of the man he loved.

But before he could delve deeper into his search, a woman, her clothes in tatters, crawled forward, her eyes wide and pleading. Will's bloodied form seemed to capture her attention, and she reached out with trembling hands, as if reaching for a lifeline in the sea of despair.

"Please, please help us," she rasped, her voice carrying the weight of countless nights spent in anguish. Will's eyes softened as he crouched down, the smell of sweat and fear intensifying as he came closer.

"How long have y'all been here?" he asked, his voice low and steady. The woman's eyes flickered with a mix of fear and hope as she whispered, "Three weeks, I reckon. They took us... took us from our families."

He cursed under his breath, his mind racing to process the information. "Did a man, tall, with dark eyes, escape from here?" he questioned urgently. The woman nodded, her eyes lighting up with recognition. "Yes, he promised... promised he'd come back for us."

Will's heart seized at the revelation, a mix of relief and renewed determination coursing through his veins. The promise hung in the air like a lifeline, connecting Will to a sliver of hope amidst the darkness. "We will come back for you," he vowed, gripping the woman's hand with his own bloodied one. "I promise."

He pulled away abruptly, rising to his feet as the distant sounds of approaching footsteps reached his ears. The urgency of the situation pressed upon him, the need to find Hannibal and unravel the sinister plot that had separated them. Will cast one final look at the captives, locking eyes with the woman he had promised to save.

Will wove through buildings. A saloon loomed ahead like a refuge that might conceal him from the prying eyes of those who sought to end his pursuit. "Man on the loose!" someone shouted, the words a rallying cry that spread like fire.

Will's eyes scanned the room. A collision of bodies became inevitable as he careened into a man wielding a baseball bat. The impact sent shockwaves through the room, and the man found himself pinned against a table. “You fuckin’ bastard!” His yells mingled with the pandemonium that surrounded them.

With ruthless efficiency, Will drew his knife, a glint of silver in the dim light. The blade danced through the air, a deadly choreography that left a trail of crimson in its wake. Slashes to the neck and stomach were executed with a brutal precision, and the final thrust of the knife carried the weight of an unhinged cowboy's primal roar.

Blood soaked Will to the bone, a morbid baptism that left him feeling strangely revitalized. The bat, abandoned by its previous owner, found a new master in the hands of the blood-streaked cowboy. Gripping the makeshift weapon, Will surged forward, a force of nature propelled by the unrelenting pursuit of his quarry.

As he navigated the maze of overturned tables, the saloon's twisted corridors offered no reprieve. Another encounter awaited.

Without hesitation, Will swung the bat with a ferocity that bordered on madness. The impact was thunderous, the sound of splintering wood drowned out by the sickening crack of bone meeting bat. The man's jaw shattered, blood painting the wall in a display of violence.

Yet, the cowboy pressed on, leaving behind the aftermath of his passage. He ran, driven by an insatiable hunger for retribution and answers.

Ducking behind another building, Will crouched in the shadows, his breaths ragged and labored. The pulsating rhythm of his heart seemed to synchronize with the chaos that enveloped the town. He peered cautiously around the corner, alert to any signs of pursuit.

Suddenly, a vice-like grip closed around his mouth, stifling his scream. Panic surged through Will as his instincts kicked into overdrive. He struggled against the unseen assailant, the blood-smeared hand a stark contrast against his own bloodied skin.

“Will.”

A voice, like silk unraveling in the darkness, slithered into his ear. Time froze, and Will's heart, already pounding, seemed to stutter. Even if he were deaf, he would recognize that voice—a voice that resonated with familiarity, a voice that haunted the depths of his memories. Hannibal.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

> hi, beautiful readers!! sorry for not posting for a bit, the past week has been insane! the epilogue will most likely be posted in a day though. :3 💘

The night was alive with noises—distant shouts, the clang of metal, and the cries of wounded men—but for Will, time slowed to a crawl as he turned his head to lock eyes with Hannibal. Hannibal, his figure bathed in splattered blood, crouched before him, a tattered shirt clinging to his muscled form, a hammer gripped firmly in his hand.

A flicker of something primal danced in Hannibal's gaze as he met Will's stare, a delight born from the carnage around them and the reunion with his beloved. Will felt a pang in his chest at the sight, a mixture of anger and an undeniable admiration for the man before him. Hannibal looked beautiful in that moment, a dark angel amidst the chaos, a vision that seared itself into Will's mind like a new religion.

Will clenched his fists, his mind torn between the urge to punch Hannibal in the damn face and the desire to surrender to him completely. Hannibal reached out, his hand coming to rest against Will's cheek, the touch warm with blood and fire. "Look at you, my monster come to find me," Hannibal murmured, his voice a low, hypnotic whisper.

With a snarl, Will fisted his hands in Hannibal's shirt, pulling him close with a ferocity born of desperation and longing. "You damn fool. Why did you let yourself get caught?" he demanded, his voice rough with emotion. "Why were you fuckin’ stupid enough to give yourself up for me?"

Hannibal's smile widened, his gaze unwavering as touched Will's cheek. "I was always going to come back to you," he said softly, his voice a promise etched in blood and bone. “ You are inside me, a part of me, a deep wound that refuses to heal."

Will's heart clenched at Hannibal's words, a rush of conflicting emotions flooding through him. He wanted to believe Hannibal, to trust in the connection that bound them together, but fear and doubt gnawed at the edges of his mind. "You left me," he whispered, his voice barely a breath against Hannibal's skin. "You could have died."

Hannibal shushed him gently, his fingers tracing patterns against Will's cheek. "I had to leave," he said, his voice tinged with regret. "But I was never far from you, Will. You were always with me, in every thought, every heartbeat."

Will closed his eyes, leaning into Hannibal's touch as the chaos of the world faded away, leaving only the two of them entwined in a moment of bloody redemption. "I missed you," he whispered.

He longed to speak the words that had been clawing at his throat, to tell Hannibal how he felt. But as he gazed into Hannibal's eyes, the words seemed to wither and die upon his lips, lost amidst the chaos and confusion that churned within him.

How could he find the courage to confess his love, to lay bare his soul before the man who had become his obsession, his salvation, and his damnation all rolled into one? How could he explain the journey that had led him to this moment, to this place where he stood on the precipice of something he could barely comprehend?

In the depths of his soul, Will knew that he had changed, that he was no longer the same man who had stumbled into Hannibal's embrace all those days ago. He had shed his old skin like a snake shedding its scales, leaving behind the shattered remnants of his former self to embrace the darkness that lurked within.

And yet, even as he felt the weight of his past bearing down upon him like a leaden yoke, Will knew that he was not afraid. He was not afraid of Hannibal, of the blood that stained his hands, or of the desires that burned in his veins. He was not afraid because he had chosen this, chosen to walk this path with eyes wide open and heart laid bare.

Will felt a sense of belonging wash over him like a warm breeze on a summer's day. Here, in the presence of this beautiful, blood-covered man, Will felt complete, whole, and utterly at

peace.

He wanted to tell Hannibal how he felt, to confess his love and lay bare his soul before him. He wanted to tell him how he had chosen this, how he had chosen to let his heart burst open like a dam bursting its banks after a long winter's thaw.

But as he looked into Hannibal's eyes, Will could see that the fight was far from over. He could still feel the energy thrumming through him, more potent now than ever before. And in that moment, he knew that their journey was far from over, that they still had many miles to go before they could rest.

“Come, Will.”

The world swam back into focus as Hannibal's voice cut through the chaos like a lone wolf's howl in the dead of night. Will blinked, the haze of adrenaline slowly dissipating as he took in the sight of Hannibal's outstretched hand, crimson-stained and beckoning. Without hesitation, he reached out.

Together they rose, the ground shifting beneath their feet as Hannibal led the way with a purposeful stride. Will followed, his gaze fixed on Hannibal's silhouette, illuminated by the pale glow of the moon.

As they walked, Will's senses sharpened, the cacophony of voices swelling around them like a chorus of ghosts. He could hear the distant echo of shouts and footsteps. But amidst the chaos, there was only Hannibal, a singular beacon of calm in the storm.

They slipped into the shelter of a building, the door creaking shut behind them with a finality that sent a shiver down Will's spine. Before he could react, he was pressed against the rough surface of the door, Hannibal's body pinning him in place with an intensity that stole his breath away.

"Damn it, Hannibal," Will gasped, a mixture of pain and pleasure coursing through his veins as Hannibal's lips descended upon his own, hungry and insistent. He groaned, unable to suppress the surge of desire that rose within him like a tide.

Hannibal's hands roamed over Will's body, leaving trails of fire in their wake as they explored every curve and contour. Will's heart thundered in his chest, a wild rhythm that matched the cadence of their frantic kisses.

"You're an idiot," Will breathed, his voice a ragged whisper against Hannibal's lips. "You should never have left me."

Hannibal's response was a low growl, his fingers tangling in Will's hair as he pulled him closer, their bodies pressed together in a fevered embrace. "I knew you would come," he murmured.

Will hesitated, his mind spinning with a thousand questions and doubts. "Did you?" he asked, his voice barely more than a whisper.

Hannibal's gaze held his own, a feral intensity burning bright in the depths of his eyes. "I always knew, Will," he said, his voice thick with emotion. "You were always meant to find me."

Will hesitated once more, his heart pounding in his chest as he searched Hannibal's eyes for the truth. "Did you really know I'd come?" he asked again.

Hannibal's breath hitched, his gaze softening as he leaned in closer, the stubble of his jaw grazing against Will's bearded cheek. "I had hoped for it," he confessed, his voice low and tinged with a hint of vulnerability. "I knew you were drawn to me, Will. But whether you would succumb to that pull or resist it, that was uncertain."

Will scoffed, a bitter edge to his tone as he pulled back slightly to meet Hannibal's gaze. "So, what? You let yourself be caught just to fuckin' test me?" he demanded, his frustration simmering just beneath the surface.

Hannibal shook his head, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips as he reached up to cup Will's cheek, his touch gentle against the rough stubble. "Not entirely," he admitted, his

voice laced with sincerity. "I had my reasons for allowing myself to be captured, but seeing what you would do, how you would react... that was certainly a factor."

Will's brow furrowed in confusion, his mind racing with questions. "What reasons?" he pressed, his voice tinged with suspicion.

Hannibal's smile widened, a glint of mischief dancing in his eyes as he leaned in closer, his lips brushing against Will's in a tantalizing caress. "Let us just say I had grown weary of our little game of cat and mouse," he murmured, his breath warm against Will's skin. "I wanted to see if you really were ready to join me."

Will's lips quirked in a half-smile, the tension between them easing slightly as he leaned into Hannibal's touch. "And what if I had run, hm?" he asked.

Hannibal's expression darkened, a predatory gleam entering his eyes as he leaned in closer, his breath hot against Will's ear. "Then I would have hunted you down," he confessed, his voice low and dangerous. "But rest assured, my dear Will, I would have found you. No matter where you went, no matter how far you ran, I would have tracked you to the ends of the earth."

A shiver ran down Will's spine at the intensity of Hannibal's words, a thrill of excitement mingling with a primal fear deep within his core. But beneath it all, there was a sense of exhilaration, a newfound freedom in the knowledge that they were bound together.

Will shuddered, the weight of Hannibal's words settling over him like a heavy blanket. "You're a damn fool, Hannibal Lecter," he muttered, his tone laced with a mixture of admiration and frustration.

Hannibal's lips curved into a wry smile, a glint of mischief dancing in his eyes. "Perhaps," he conceded, his voice tinged with amusement. "But I am your fool, cowboy. And I would do anything for you."

And as Hannibal's lips met his own in a searing kiss, Will felt a sense of certainty settle over him like a warm blanket on a cold winter's night. They may have walked different paths,

danced on opposite sides of the line between right and wrong, but in the end, they were two halves of the same whole.

Hannibal winced as Will's hand squeezed his sides, a sharp hiss escaping his lips. Images flashed through Will's mind, images of Luther's brutality, of hands twisted into instruments of torment. Luther hitting Hannibal, his men toying with him as if he were nothing more than a plaything. The fury boiled in Will's veins, hot and fierce like the flames of a raging inferno.

Taking Hannibal's hand in his own, Will guided him away from the door, his touch gentle yet firm as he sought to soothe the turmoil that raged within him. His fingers brushed against the rough fabric of Hannibal's collar, seeking solace in the familiar warmth of his skin.

But as his hand searched for the familiar weight of Mischa's locket, he felt only emptiness, a void where once there had been a precious keepsake. Anger flared within him, a white-hot fury that threatened to consume him whole.

"They took it again when I arrived," Hannibal confessed, his voice clipped.

Will gritted his teeth in frustration, his jaw clenched tight as he fought to contain the roiling anger that simmered beneath the surface. Luther was a damned bastard, and Will swore to whatever gods may be that he would pay for what he had done.

"We'll get it back," Will vowed, his voice low and fierce. "No matter what it takes. Luther won't have it, not if I have anything to say about it."

Hannibal's gaze softened, a faint smile ghosting across his lips as he looked at Will with a mixture of admiration and affection. "You are a force to be reckoned with, Will," he murmured, his voice a soft caress against the tumultuous storm of Will's emotions.

Will sighed heavily, the weight of their predicament settling heavy on his shoulders like a leaden cloak. "This ain't over," he muttered, his tone grim and determined.

Hannibal nodded in agreement, his eyes shining with a steely resolve that mirrored Will's own. "There are too many damn men," Will continued, his voice heavy with frustration. "I've killed a dozen and yet there's still more out there." A curse escaped Will's lips.

Hannibal's eyes sparkled with a wicked gleam as he turned to face Will fully, a smirk playing at the corners of his lips. It was a look that Will knew all too well, and one he had missed with his entire soul.

"The heavens will disappear with a roar," Hannibal recited, his voice low and melodious, each word dripping with a sinister allure. "The elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare."

Will felt a thrill shoot through him at Hannibal's words, excitement bubbling up inside him like a geyser ready to erupt. He frowned, a crease forming between his brows as he regarded Hannibal with a mixture of anticipation and curiosity.

"You're not thinkin' what I think you're thinkin', are you?" Will asked, his voice laced with both apprehension and excitement.

Hannibal tilted his head to the side, his gaze fixed on Will with an intensity that sent shivers down his spine. "And what, pray tell, do you think I am thinking?" he replied, his tone teasing yet tinged with a hint of danger.

A grin spread across Will's face, the familiar thrill of anticipation coursing through his veins like a wildfire blazing across the prairie. "I think you're thinkin' exactly what I'm thinkin'," he declared, his voice ringing with confidence.

Hannibal chuckled softly, a sound that sent pleasure down Will's spine. "Will," he murmured, his eyes alight with mischief. "How I've missed your sharp wit and keen intuition."

Will felt a surge of warmth flood his chest at Hannibal's words, a sense of longing and belonging that washed over him like a gentle tide. "So, how do you propose we pull it off?" he asked, his voice eager.

Hannibal's eyes gleamed with a predatory light as he surveyed their surroundings. "There are lanterns and liquor in the saloon," he murmured, his voice low and smooth like whiskey poured over ice. "All we have to do is pour it."

Will bit down on his lip, the taste of blood mingling with the dry air as he leaned closer to Hannibal, their faces smeared with crimson and dirt. "Luther's still a goddamn problem," he whispered, his voice heavy with concern.

Hannibal hummed thoughtfully, his gaze never leaving Will's as he considered their next move. "We will deal with him first, then," he replied, his tone confident and unwavering.

Will arched an eyebrow, a hint of skepticism in his gaze. "Do you even know where the hell he is?" he asked.

Hannibal's lips curled into a smirk, a dangerous glint in his eyes. "Not yet," he admitted, "but we will find him."

A grin spread across Will's face at Hannibal's words, his imagination running wild with possibilities. He pictured Hannibal sniffing the air like a bloodhound, tracking Luther's scent through the chaos of the frontier town, and couldn't help but chuckle at the thought.

But as the image faded, replaced by the harsh reality of their situation, Will's expression grew serious once more. He furrowed his brow as he thought of the prisoners.

"I'd rather just get out of here," he muttered, his voice tinged with frustration, "leave them to die."

But even as the words left his lips, Will felt a pang of guilt tug at his heartstrings, a nagging reminder of his own humanity. He couldn't abandon them, not when innocent lives hung in the balance.

"Did you really mean you'd come back for them?" he asked, his voice softer now, laced with uncertainty.

Hannibal's expression softened, a hint of warmth in his gaze as he met Will's eyes. "I always keep my promises," he replied, his voice steady and sure.

Will huffed in frustration, the weight of their mission pressing down on him. "We shouldn't be wastin’ any more time, then," he declared, his voice firm with resolve.

Hannibal's dismissive tut sent a flicker of irritation through Will, but he couldn't help the eye roll that followed. "Worry too much, do I?" he retorted, his tone edged with sarcasm.

Leaning in, Hannibal's lips brushed against Will's, igniting a fire that burned deep within him. "Perhaps they can be of use to us," he murmured against Will's skin, his voice a seductive whisper.

Will gripped Hannibal's bloodied hair, his fingers tangling in the tangled locks as he pulled him closer. "How?" he demanded, his voice husky with desire.

Hannibal's lips pressed against Will's. "Then the seven angels who had the seven trumpets prepared to sound them," he recited, his voice low. "The first angel sounded his trumpet, and there came hail and fire mixed with blood, and it was hurled down upon the earth."

A shudder ran through Will at Hannibal's words, a thrill of excitement mingling with the heat of their passion. He kissed Hannibal fiercely, his lips moving hungrily against his, always hungry for more.

He wanted to devour Hannibal here, to take him and lose himself in the heat of their desire. The thought of feeling the dry blood on their skin crack as they writhed together sent a surge of arousal coursing through him, and he groaned against Hannibal's lips.

As Hannibal pressed his leg between Will's, the sensation sending sparks of pleasure shooting through Will's body, he groaned in response. "I've missed you, Hannibal," he confessed, his voice raw.

Hannibal murmured sweet words against Will's ear, his breath hot against Will's skin. "My lovely-eyed boy," he whispered, his voice dripping with affection.

Will shivered at the endearment, a surge of warmth flooding his chest. "I ain't no damn boy," he protested weakly, though his heart wasn't in it.

With a smirk, Hannibal backed away, his eyes alight with mischief as they both heard voices approaching. "I suppose we must go," he sighed theatrically, as if lamenting the interruption.

Will nodded dumbly, his mind still reeling from the intensity of their encounter.

Will watched in silence as Hannibal effortlessly climbed out of the window, his movements fluid and graceful despite the chaos that surrounded them. He took Hannibal's offered hand, feeling the warmth as he followed suit and dropped to the ground below.

The impact sent a jolt through Will's body, but he ignored the discomfort, his focus solely on Hannibal as he waited for his lead. He knew there were countless questions swirling in his mind, a torrent of thoughts and uncertainties clamoring for attention, but for now, he pushed them aside, trusting in their ability to weather whatever storm lay ahead.

Hannibal closed his eyes briefly, his features serene as he took a deep breath, as if savoring the taste of the night air. When he opened his eyes again, they gleamed with determination, a spark of anticipation dancing within their depths.

"This way," Hannibal declared, his voice cutting through the stillness of the night like a blade. Without hesitation, he set off at a brisk pace, his movements purposeful and sure.

As they burst through the doors of the stables, Will's muscles tensed, his fists clenched in anticipation. The prisoners flinched at their sudden entrance, their eyes wide with fear as they recognized the two figures before them.

Will approached them slowly, his gaze locking onto the woman he had spoken to earlier. Her eyes met his, filled with a mixture of relief and gratitude, and she stepped forward to greet him.

"Thank you for coming back," she said, her voice trembling with emotion.

Will nodded, his jaw set with determination. "We need your help," he replied, his voice low but firm. "Me and Hannibal here."

The woman nodded, her eyes darting to the others gathered around her. "We'll do anythin' you ask," she said, her voice echoing with resolve.

Will glanced back at Hannibal, who stepped forward to address the group. His presence was commanding, his voice carrying a weight that demanded attention.

"We are going to set you free," Hannibal began, his tone steady and unwavering. "But first, we must bring an end to Luther's reign of terror."

He spoke of revenge and reckoning, his words painting a picture of justice born from fire and fury. Will listened intently, his heart pounding in his chest as Hannibal outlined their plan.

"We shall take the alcohol from the saloon," Hannibal declared, his gaze sweeping over the assembled group. "We shall douse the streets with it, turning this town into a blazing inferno that will consume everything in its path."

"And when the flames have done their work, when the smoke clears and the ashes settle, we shall emerge victorious," Hannibal proclaimed, his voice ringing with a fierce defiance. "You shall be free."

The woman's brow furrowed with concern as she listened to Hannibal's words. "But where will we go after?" she asked, her voice laced with uncertainty.

Hannibal tilted his head, a faint smile playing at the corners of his lips. "I promised to set you free," he replied, his voice soft but resolute. "Not to lead you to safety. That is up to you."

Will's jaw tightened at Hannibal's words, his gaze flickering with anger. But he pushed the feeling aside, focusing on the task at hand. He stood beside Hannibal, his voice steady as he addressed the woman once more.

"Will you help us?" he asked, his tone firm but pleading.

The woman glanced around at the other prisoners, her eyes searching their faces for reassurance. After a moment, they nodded in unison, their expressions eager.

"Yes," the woman said, turning back to Will and Hannibal. "We'll help you."

Will nodded in gratitude, his heart swelling with relief. He looked at Hannibal, a silent plea in his eyes.

"Help me get them free," he said.

As they moved through the shadows of the town, their footsteps muffled by the cloak of night, Will felt a sense of eerie calm settle over him. Hand in hand with Hannibal, they navigated the streets like phantoms, their presence unnoticed by all but the darkness itself.

"Luther is in the town hotel," Hannibal whispered, his voice barely audible over the rush of the wind. Will nodded, a surge of adrenaline coursing through his veins at the prospect of finally confronting their enemy.

"That nose of yours ain't just for show," Will remarked with a hint of admiration. Hannibal's lips curled into a predatory smile, his eyes gleaming.

"It has its uses," Hannibal replied cryptically.

"We will need to move carefully," Hannibal continued, his tone serious. "We cannot afford to get noticed."

Will gritted his teeth at the notion of stealth, his fingers itching to reach for the gun holstered at his side. "I'd rather go in guns blazin’," he admitted gruffly, his impatience palpable.

Hannibal's expression softened, a flicker of understanding in his eyes. "Patience, Will," he urged. "We must be strategic if we are to succeed."

Will grunted in agreement, though his reluctance was evident in the set of his jaw. "Fine," he conceded, though the words tasted bitter on his tongue. "But let's make it quick. I ain't one for tiptoein' around."

Hannibal's smile widened, a glint of mischief dancing in his gaze. "Understood," he replied, his voice tinged with amusement.

The darkness cloaked them like a shroud as they moved with silent determination through buildings and tents, their footsteps muffled against the hard-packed earth. Will's grip tightened around his Colt.

As voices drifted toward them from around a corner, Hannibal raised a finger to his lips in a gesture of caution, prompting a scowl from Will. With practiced ease, they waited until a trio of men passed by before Will sprang into action, his movements swift and decisive.

His Colt pressed against the temple of the man on the right, Will's voice was a low, menacing hiss as he issued his ultimatum. "Drop your weapons, or your friend here meets his maker," he growled, his eyes flashing with determination.

The man in Will's grasp tensed, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he pleaded with Will to reconsider. "Don't do anythin' stupid, mister," he warned, his voice edged with desperation.

But Will's resolve was unwavering as he held firm, his gaze steely as he addressed the other two men. "You heard me," he spat, his tone laced with defiance. "Drop your guns and kick 'em over here, nice and easy."

With a begrudging nod, the two men complied, their weapons clattering to the ground as they raised their hands in surrender. The man in Will's grip squirmed, his protests falling on deaf ears as Will tightened his hold.

"Who do you think you are?" one of the men snarled, his voice tinged with bravado. "You don't know who you're messin' with."

Will's lips curled into a derisive smirk, his grip on his Colt unyielding. "Oh, I know plenty," he retorted, his voice dripping with contempt. "Me and my friend here just took out half your damn crew. You ain't got no idea who you're dealin' with."

Hannibal's gaze remained cool and calculating as he surveyed the scene, his presence a silent but potent reminder of the danger they posed. "Enough talk," Will said. "Where the hell is Luther?" Will didn't doubt Hannibal's claims, but he was too weak to resist the rush of power from questioning these men.

The men exchanged wary glances, a flicker of uncertainty crossing their faces. "He's at the damn hotel," one of them finally admitted, his voice tinged with resignation. "But you ain't gonna get to him without a fight."

Will's instincts kicked into high gear as he watched one of the men make a desperate lunge toward Hannibal. Without a second thought, he aimed his gun and pulled the trigger, only to be met with the hollow click of an empty chamber. Cursing under his breath, he swiftly holstered his useless Colt and drew his knife, his movements swift and fluid as he slit the throat of the man in his grasp.

With a ragged breath, Will sprinted toward Hannibal, his heart pounding in his chest as he watched his companion wield his hammer with ruthless efficiency. The clash of metal against flesh filled the air, a symphony of violence that fueled Will's adrenaline-fueled frenzy.

As one of the men landed a punch on Hannibal's side, Will surged into action, his muscles coiled with tension as he violently grabbed the assailant and slammed him against the rough surface of a nearby building. The cacophony of noise around them masked their altercation, providing cover for Will's brutal onslaught.

"You picked the wrong damn day," Will growled.

With a snarl, Will raised his knife and slashed across the man's torso, the metallic tang of blood mingling with the acrid scent of gunpowder and sweat. His jaw stung as he was struck in retaliation, but he gritted his teeth through the pain, his resolve unyielding as he delivered a crushing blow that elicited a sickening crack.

With his assailant incapacitated, Will wasted no time in dispatching him, his knife plunging deep into the man's heart with lethal precision. As he withdrew the blade, he scanned the chaos for Hannibal, his heart skipping a beat as he caught sight of his companion with a wicked snarl on his lips.

Hannibal's movements were a deadly dance of savagery as he tackled the remaining adversary, his hammer descending with brutal force again and again. Each strike reverberated through Will's bones, sending a thrill of primal satisfaction coursing through his veins as he watched Hannibal dominate his opponent.

Will breathed raggedly as Hannibal stood with elegance and strode his way to him, the rush of adrenaline still coursing through Will’s veins like wildfire.

"Do you feel it now, Will?" Hannibal's voice was low, almost a whisper, yet it cut through the tumult of the night like a knife.

Will swallowed hard, his throat tight with emotion. He knew exactly what Hannibal meant – the primal exhilaration of the kill, the raw intimacy of their shared savagery. It was a sensation unlike any other, a heady cocktail of fear and desire that pulsed through his veins.

"Yeah," Will breathed, his voice barely more than a hoarse whisper. "I feel it. It's like... like my blood's turned to damn gold."

The words spilled from his lips unbidden, a testament to the intoxicating power of the moment. He couldn't help but think back to the tales of Pegasus and Bellerophon, the mythical warrior and his divine steed. In that moment, he felt a kinship with the legendary creature, bound to Hannibal by a bond stronger than steel.

Hannibal's smile was like a beacon in the darkness, a promise of more thrills to come. "Then let us press on, mio caro," he murmured, his voice low and husky with satisfaction. "There are still scores to settle, and deeds to be done."

As they approached the fallen bodies of their adversaries, Will skidded to a halt, his eyes scanning the ground for any sign of movement. With a swift motion, he bent down to retrieve a discarded gun, it’s weight reassuring in his hands as he thrust it into his belt.

"We'll need this," Will muttered, his voice low and gravelly with fatigue.

Hannibal nodded in agreement, his eyes glittering with anticipation as they resumed their frantic pace. Each step felt like a Herculean effort, but Will pushed through the pain, his mind focused on the task at hand.

Ducking behind a nearby wagon, Will peered cautiously around its wooden frame, his gaze fixed on the looming silhouette of the hotel in the distance. His heart sank as he counted the four guards stationed outside, their watchful eyes scanning the area with practiced vigilance.

Turning to Hannibal, Will's voice was barely a whisper as he voiced his doubts. "Think we can sneak past ‘em?"

Hannibal's response was swift and decisive. "No," he murmured.

Will nodded in understanding, his mind already racing with the possibilities of their next move. With a furrowed brow, he leaned in closer to Hannibal.

"What's the plan once we get in?" he asked, his gaze fixed on Hannibal with unwavering intensity. "I want to end this, Hannibal. I want Luther dead."

The mention of Luther's name sent a shiver down Will's spine, a surge of anger coursing through him at the thought of their relentless pursuer. He clenched his jaw tightly, his hands balling into fists at his sides as he spoke. Luther had stolen from him—his livelihood, his peace of mind, his very heart. He deserved to pay for his crimes, to face justice for the havoc he had wreaked upon their lives.

"He stole from us, Hannibal," Will growled, his voice low and tinged with venom. "He's been trailin’ us for too damn long. It ends tonight."

Hannibal's eyes gleamed with a sinister light as he turned to Will, a grin twisting his lips. "We shall eat Luther's heart," he said, his voice smooth as velvet, yet laced with the darkness of his desires.

Will's gaze met Hannibal's, holding steady despite the chill that ran down his spine at the suggestion. He watched as Hannibal's grin widened, a predatory glint in his eyes, and he couldn't help but imagine the grisly scene playing out before him.

He saw Hannibal sinking his teeth into the hot organ, blood spurting like a fountain, the visceral satisfaction evident in every movement. It stirred memories deep within Will's psyche, memories of his own past, of his father teaching him the ways of the hunt, of the taste of fresh blood from a deer’s heart on his tongue.

"I remember," Will murmured, his voice thick with the weight of those memories. "My dad made me eat the heart of my first hunt. I can still taste it now, the blood rushing into my mouth like a damn river."

Hannibal's gaze never wavered, his expression unreadable as he listened to Will's confession. There was a hunger in his eyes, a hunger that mirrored Will's own.

"This is ain’t our first hunt, though," Will continued, his voice gaining strength as he spoke. "We've danced this dance before, you and I."

Hannibal leaned forward, his breath ghosting over Will's face as he spoke, his voice low and hypnotic. "But you have never hunted like this before, my dear Will. This is something new, something... beautiful."

Will took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was to come. "Then let's do it," he said, his voice steady despite the turmoil raging within him. "Let's both eat his damn heart."

A feral gleam lit up Hannibal's eyes, and without hesitation, he surged forward, his nose trailing along Will's cheek, inhaling deeply as though savoring the scent of his lover.

"You are a magnificent creature, Will," Hannibal whispered, his voice a dark caress against Will's skin. "The wood surfaces of my mind palace all have your name carved into them, each one a testament to your brilliance."

Will's heart pounded in his chest as he stared into Hannibal's eyes, seeing the hunger reflected there, knowing that they were bound together by something deeper and darker than mere friendship. They were two predators, circling each other in the darkness, drawn together by a primal instinct that neither could deny.

With a trembling hand, Will tilted Hannibal's chin up, his touch gentle yet possessive, and pressed his lips to Hannibal's in a fierce kiss. It was a desperate gesture, born of the madness that simmered beneath the surface.

"I'll take the two on the left," Will murmured against Hannibal's lips, his accent thick with the drawl of the South. "You take the two on the right."

Hannibal's response was barely a whisper, lost amidst the noise of the bustling town around them, but Will heard it all the same. "Yes, Will," Hannibal said, his voice teasing and desperate, sending a shiver down Will's spine.

With a gentle push, Will separated himself from Hannibal, the touch lingering like a brand on his skin, before gripping his knife tightly in his hand. He glanced back at Hannibal one last time, meeting his gaze with a silent understanding, before turning and making his way around the wagon, weaving through the maze of small buildings with the skill of a seasoned tracker.

As he approached the hotel, his heart thrummed with excitement, the rush of adrenaline fueling his every move. He reached up and tilted his blood-speckled hat over his eyes, obscuring his face in shadow as he prepared to face whatever lay ahead.

He was more ready than he had ever been, his senses sharp and his instincts honed to a razor's edge. With a silent prayer to whatever gods might be listening, Will stepped out into the night.

Will slinked his way through the shadows, his movements fluid and silent as he approached one of the guards stationed outside the hotel. Leaning casually against the wall, he let out a low whistle, drawing the man's attention.

The guard whirled around, his hand moving to the holster at his hip, but before he could react, Will was upon him, grinning like a cat that had cornered its prey.

"Howdy," Will drawled, his accent thick with the twang of the South as he pulled out one of his guns, the metal gleaming in the dim light of the street.

Without hesitation, he squeezed the trigger, the sharp crack of gunfire echoing through the night as he dispatched the guard with deadly precision, a satisfied smirk playing at the

corners of his lips.

But even as he fired, he heard the telltale sound of footsteps approaching from behind, and he cursed under his breath. Before the second guard could react, Will spun around, his arm shooting out to grab hold of the man's wrist, his grip like iron as he twisted the man's arm.

With a swift motion, he lifted his knee into the guard's stomach, driving the air from his lungs with a pained gasp. Stepping forward, Will pressed his boot against the man's chest, pinning him to the ground as he looked down at him with cold, unyielding eyes.

"Where's your honor, cowboy?" the guard wheezed, his eyes pleading for mercy.

Will's lip curled in disdain. "There ain't no honor in this damn town," he spat, his voice dripping with contempt as he raised his gun, the barrel pointed squarely at the man's forehead. Without another word, he pulled the trigger, the gunshot ringing out like a death knell as the guard's body went limp beneath him, his lifeblood staining the dirt-strewn street.

With the deed done, Will wasted no time, knowing that the sound of gunfire would draw others like vultures to carrion. Quickly, he holstered his gun.

Will jogged to the other side of the building, his boots thudding against the hard-packed earth as he rounded the corner to find Hannibal locked in a brutal struggle with one of Luther's men. He watched with a mix of fascination and excitement as Hannibal slammed the man's head into the wall over and over again, each impact sending a sickening crunch echoing through the night.

His gaze swept over the scene, taking in the sight of the other guard lying dead on the ground nearby. With determination, Will hurried over to the writhing man in Hannibal's grip, his knife already drawn and gleaming in the dim light.

Without hesitation, he grabbed the man's collar and yanked him down, exposing his throat to the cold steel of Will's blade. With a swift motion, Will drove the knife home, the sound of flesh parting with a sickening squelch.

As the man's struggles ceased and his lifeblood spilled out onto the ground, Will rose to his feet, his chest heaving with exertion and adrenaline. He turned towards Hannibal, his expression unreadable as their eyes met in silent communication.

Hannibal extended a hand towards the door, a silent invitation to continue their deadly dance. Will smirked in response, the thrill of the hunt coursing through his veins.

"Ladies first," he quipped, gesturing towards the door with a flourish.

Hannibal raised an eyebrow at Will's jest, but said nothing as he strode past him, his movements graceful and purposeful. Will followed close behind, his grip tight on the gun he had taken from one of Luther's men.

As they entered the bank, their bloodied forms drawing Luther's attention, Will couldn't help but feel a surge of excitement at the sight of their prey. Luther sat behind the desk, his legs propped up on the table, a look of weary resignation etched on his face.

"Howdy there, Luther," Will drawled, his accent thick as molasses as he greeted their quarry.

Luther sighed heavily, running a hand down his face as he regarded them with tired eyes. "Well, ain't this a sight," he muttered under his breath. "How are you two still alive?”

"Seems you have gotten yourself into quite the predicament, Luther," Hannibal remarked, his voice smooth as silk but laced with a dangerous edge. "But then again, I did say your lack of foresight would be your downfall."

Luther's jaw clenched tightly, his fingers drumming impatiently against the armrest of his chair. He shot a venomous glare in Hannibal's direction, his nostrils flaring with barely contained rage.

"You think you can waltz in here and talk down to me, Hannibal?" Luther spat, his voice tinged with venom. "You may have your fancy words and your highfalutin airs, but you ain't nothin' but a damn fool."

Will felt a surge of anger rise within him at Luther's words, his grip tightening around the gun as he fought to keep his emotions in check. Luther's arrogance grated on his nerves, and he was itching for a chance to wipe the smugness off the man's face.

"We ain't here to trade barbs, Luther," Will interjected, his voice low and dangerous. "We're here for what's ours, and we ain't leavin' till we get it."

Luther's eyes narrowed as he regarded them with a calculating gaze, his lips curling into a derisive sneer. "And what, pray tell, do you think you're owed, cowboy?" he taunted, his voice dripping with mockery. "Ain't nothin' in this world that belongs to the likes of you."

Will felt a surge of fury boil within him at Luther's words, his grip on the gun tightening until his knuckles turned white. "You took somethin' from Hannibal, Luther," he growled, his voice low and menacing. "Somethin' that rightfully belongs to him. And I aim to take it back, one way or another."

Luther's laughter rang out through the room, the sound grating on Will's nerves like nails on a chalkboard. "You think you can challenge me?" he sneered, his voice laced with contempt. "You're nothin' but a flea on the back of a dog, boy."

Will's hand tightened around the grip of his gun, the steel cold against his skin as he took a step forward, his eyes narrowed on Luther with a deadly intensity.

"I ain't no fuckin' boy. Accept that your damn luck has run out," he growled, the drawl of his accent thick as syrup.

But before he could make a move, Hannibal spoke, his voice calm yet tinged with a hint of amusement. "You are aware there has been a slight change of plans, Luther," he said, his tone theatrical as he sighed dramatically. "It seems you will sadly not be enjoying the taste of my tongue after all."

Will's patience wore thin, his finger tightening on the trigger of his gun as he barked out his demand. "Give the damn locket back, Luther," he snarled, his voice dripping with menace.

But Luther merely scoffed as he stood up abruptly and made his way towards Will, his movements defiant and reckless. "I ain't afraid of you, Lecter," he spat, his voice laced with contempt.

Hannibal stepped up behind Will, his presence a silent warning as he spoke, his words carrying a note of warning. "You would be wise to listen, Luther," he said, his voice smooth. "My associate here does not like to play games."

Luther's lip curled in a sneer, his bravado faltering only slightly as he met Hannibal's gaze with defiance. "I ain't afraid of your damn lapdog either," he taunted, his voice thick with disdain.

Will felt a surge of anger at the insult, but he pushed it down, knowing that Luther's words held little weight in the face of the danger they posed. He had already cast himself as Cerberus, the guardian of the underworld, and Luther would do well to know that.

Hannibal's smirk widened at Luther's defiance, a glint of amusement dancing in his eyes as he spoke. "I warned you not to steal from me, Luther," he said, his voice ice-cold. "But it seems you didn't heed my warning."

Luther cursed and screamed for his guards, but Will knew that it was futile. They were dead, their bodies lying cold and lifeless on the streets outside. Luther was alone now, with no one to protect him from the wrath of the two men standing before him. Will heard Hannibal move to rummage through Luther’s drawers.

Will crowded Luther against his desk, his gaze piercing as he spoke, his voice low and dangerous. "Your guards are dead, Luther," he said, his words a chilling reminder of the fate that awaited their quarry. "And the other half of your men are too. Do you really want to join them?"

The simmering rage inside Will threatened to boil over as he studied Luther, the man who had dared to steal from him, to touch what was rightfully his with his filthy, goddamn hands. But Will held his fury in check, his lips twisting into a taunting grin as he met Luther's gaze with cold, unyielding defiance.

Hannibal stopped rummaging through the drawers, his attention drawn to the interaction between Will and Luther. With a tsk of disapproval, he approached Will, the locket clutched in his hands as he addressed Luther with a tone of admonishment.

"It is impolite to steal once, Luther," Hannibal chided. "Twice is simply rude." He tied the locket around his neck where it belonged.

Will's relief was palpable as Hannibal gave the signal to end Luther's miserable existence. He turned his head to look at Hannibal, his eyes filled with anticipation as he prepared to deliver the final blow.

But before he could react, Luther seized the opportunity to strike, lunging at Will with a desperation born of fear and desperation. Will's gun went off with a deafening bang, the sound echoing through the room as the bullet tore through the air and embedded itself in the roof above.

With a grunt of pain, Will stumbled backwards, his movements clumsy as he clamored to evade Luther's attack. He hit the floor with a thud, his heart racing as he struggled to regain his footing, his gun skidding across the floor.

The room spun around him as he fought to catch his breath, the taste of blood thick in his mouth as he stared up at Luther, his eyes burning with a fierce determination. He would not let Luther best him, not after all they had been through.

Will felt his heart pounding in his chest as Luther wrestled the knife from his belt, the glint of steel flashing in the dim light of the room. With a desperate lunge, Luther stabbed towards Will, the blade slicing through the air with deadly intent.

But Will was quicker, rolling to the side with lightning speed as the knife planted itself in the floor with a resounding thud. He scrambled to his feet, his breath coming in ragged gasps as he watched Luther with wary eyes.

Before Luther could strike again, Hannibal was upon him, his movements swift and decisive as he pulled Luther away from Will's vulnerable position. Will seized the opportunity, grabbing the knife from the floor and rising forward to strike.

With a savage snarl, he drove the blade into Luther's thigh, the sound of flesh parting under the force of his blow drowned out by Luther's screams of agony. But Luther fought back, throwing his fist with wild abandon as he struck Will square in the nose.

Will felt a sharp pain explode behind his eyes as blood streamed down his face, his head spinning with the force of the blow. He cursed under his breath, his vision swimming as he struggled to stay upright.

Through the haze of pain, he saw Hannibal slammed against the wall, the impact sending a shockwave through the room. But Hannibal was not so easily defeated, rising to his feet with a fierce determination.

With a steely resolve, Will crawled forward, his hand closing around the hilt of his knife as he pulled it free from Luther's thigh. Gripping the blade tightly, he lunged forward at the same time as Hannibal, their movements synchronized.

Will wrapped his arms around Luther's torso, scooting up against the wall as he tightened his grip, his muscles straining with the effort. He moved his arms to wrap around Luther's neck, cutting off his air supply as he struggled against the vice-like grip.

He felt a surge of satisfaction as Luther's struggles grew, his face turning red with the lack of oxygen. But Will knew that they had to finish it, had to end Luther's reign of terror once and for all.

He looked up to see Hannibal watching him with a calculating gaze, his eyes gleaming with a fierce intensity. "Grab the damn knife, Hannibal," Will grunted through gritted teeth. "Do it

now."

Hannibal's smile was like the devil's own grin as he claimed Will's knife, his eyes gleaming with a predatory glint that sent shivers down Will's spine. With a fluid grace, he straddled both Will and Luther, his weight pressing down on Luther's writhing form with an almost possessive force.

Will's gaze was fixed upon Luther, his chest rising and falling with ragged breaths as he struggled against Hannibal's hold. Despite the burning ache in his muscles, Will remained transfixed, his eyes locked on Luther.

As Hannibal began to slice open Luther's shirt, Will felt a shudder ripple through him. The sight of Luther's exposed flesh, marred by the blade's cruel touch, filled him with a strange mixture of horror and awe. He couldn't tear his eyes away, couldn't deny the sickening thrill that coursed through him at the sight of the blood.

With each calculated incision, Hannibal's voice took on a clinical tone, describing his actions with chilling detachment. But beneath the calm façade, Will could sense the simmering excitement that bubbled just beneath the surface, like a predator reveling in the hunt.

With a deft hand, Hannibal continued his work, the blade of Will's knife slicing through flesh and sinew with disturbing ease.

As the blood pooled beneath Luther's writhing form, Will felt a surge of satisfaction wash over him. This was justice, he told himself, a reckoning long overdue. And as he watched Hannibal work, a sense of determination settled over him like a heavy cloak, driving him forward with a single purpose in mind: to see Luther brought to his knees, to witness the downfall of a man who dared to cross them.

In that moment, as Hannibal's blade danced across Luther's flesh, Will knew that there would be no mercy, no forgiveness. Only retribution, swift and merciless, as they exacted their own brand of justice upon the man who had dared to defy them.

Hannibal's hands moved with a surgeon's precision as he delved deeper into Luther's chest, his fingers probing the gaping wound with a relentless determination. With each movement, Will heard the sickening sound of bones cracking under Hannibal's touch, a testament to the man's unnerving strength.

As Luther writhed in agony, Hannibal's focus remained unwavering. With a steady hand, he reached deeper into the cavity, his fingers dancing over organs and tissue with a familiarity.

"Come watch, mylimasis," Hannibal murmured, his voice a low, hypnotic whisper that sent a shiver down Will's spine. With a mixture of horror and morbid fascination, Will crawled closer to Hannibal, his eyes fixed on the spectacle unfolding before him.

Hannibal continued his work, his movements precise and deliberate as he searched for his prize. And then, with a triumphant gleam in his eyes, Hannibal announced his success, his voice tinged with an almost childlike excitement.

"I've found it," Hannibal declared, his eyes alight with an unholy fervor. "Now, Will, it is your turn. Cut."

Will nodded, his heart pounding in his chest as he took the knife from Hannibal's outstretched hand. With trembling hands, he began to carve, his movements guided by Hannibal's steady voice as he cut through flesh and sinew.

Blood oozed from the wound, staining the floorboards beneath them as Will worked, his hands slick with gore. And then, with a final twist of his wrist, Hannibal guided Luther's heart free from its cavity, cradling the pulsating organ in his bloodstained hands.

Will's breath caught in his throat as he watched Hannibal guide the heart to him, his palms outstretched in offering. “Eat.”

Will's mind was a whirlwind of conflicting emotions as he looked at Luther's heart in his lover’s hands, its rhythmic pulsations a reminder of the life it once sustained. He had judged Luther for his cannibalistic ways, condemned him for his depravity. And yet, as he gazed upon the quivering organ, he couldn't help but feel a sense of reverence wash over him.

This was different.

This wasn't about satisfying a base hunger or indulging in a twisted desire for power. This was Hannibal offering a piece of himself, a gesture of intimacy and trust that transcended the horrors of their reality. It was a tender and sacred exchange.

Will's fingers trembled as he brought the heart to his lips, his breath hitching in his chest as he hesitated for a moment, his mind warring with his instincts. He knew he was a hypocrite, a man who had condemned others for their sins while committing atrocities of his own. But in this moment, as he stood on the precipice of consuming the heart of his enemy, he couldn't deny the allure that beckoned to him.

With a shaky exhale, Will closed his eyes and leaned forward, his teeth sinking into the warm flesh with a sickening crunch. The taste of blood and sinew filled his mouth, sending a shiver down his spine as he savored the forbidden feast.

In that moment, as he swallowed the juice of Luther's heart, Will felt a sense of catharsis wash over him, a release of pent-up tension and guilt that had plagued him for so long. He knew he could never go back to the man he once was, could never erase the stains of blood that now marked his soul. But in this act of communion with Hannibal, he found a kind of solace, a reminder that they were bound together by something deeper and darker than mere mortal flesh.

The memories flooded Will's mind like a deluge, washing over him with a force that threatened to drown him in nostalgia. He saw himself as a young boy, standing beside his father in the dappled shade of the forest, his hands slick with the blood of the deer they had just slain. The image was vivid, almost tangible, as if he could reach out and touch the warmth of the sun on his skin, the rough texture of his father's calloused hands as they tousled his hair with pride.

The sound of the rustling leaves, the buzz of insects in the air, the distant call of a bird – they all mingled together in a symphony of nature's song, a melody that had not echoed through the corridors of his memory for years. And amidst it all, there was his father's voice, gruff and reassuring, praising him for a job well done, for proving himself to be a true son of the land.

For a moment, as he stood in that dingy hotel with Luther's heart in his mouth, Will felt himself transported back to that simpler time, back to the innocence of youth when the world seemed vast and full of promise. He remembered the thrill of the hunt, the exhilaration of the kill, and the sense of accomplishment that came with providing for his family.

Will swallowed the metallic tang of blood, the coppery taste potent in his mouth as he opened his eyes to find Hannibal watching him with a fervent intensity that sent a shiver down his body. In that moment, everything seemed to fade away except for the two of them, bound together by the primal urge that pulsed between them like a living thing.

With a surge of raw desire, Will surged forward, his lips crashing against Hannibal's in a fierce, bruising kiss. The taste of blood mingled between them, thick and heady, as they drank deeply from each other's mouths, the heat of their passion threatening to consume them both.

Will wanted to consume Hannibal, to be the beast that lurked beneath his skin, the darkness that whispered in his ear and drove him to madness. He wanted to be Hannibal's beginning and his end, his undoing and his salvation, his divine creator and his eternal damnation.

He wanted to devour Hannibal whole, to be the fire that burned within him, the spark that ignited his every desire. He wanted Hannibal to love him with a fervor that matched his own, to worship him like the faithful flock to the temple and to offer himself up as the sacrificial lamb upon the altar of their desire.

Will wanted to be Hannibal's life, his everything, his reason for existing in a world that had long since lost its meaning. He wanted to create worlds out of Hannibal and to wake up next to him in the morning, their bodies intertwined in a tangled mess of limbs and desire.

He wanted to brush Hannibal's hair with gentle fingers and to choke him with rough hands, to make him bleed and to kiss the blood from his mouth with a savage hunger that bordered on madness. He wanted to bury himself deep inside the wound of Hannibal's desire, to be the only thing that could fill the void that consumed them both.

Will wanted Hannibal to fight him to the death, to be his lovely-eyed boy and his worst fear all rolled into one. He wanted to feel Hannibal's fingers in his mouth and his teeth on his

jugular, to dance on the precipice of eternal death with only their desire to guide them.

He wanted, he wanted, he wanted, like he had never wanted before, and he allowed himself to revel in the sheer ecstasy of it all, knowing that in this moment, he could have it.

Will's whispered words hung heavy in the air, barely audible over the ragged breaths and the pounding of their hearts. "I reckon.. I reckon I love you," he murmured, his voice barely more than a breath against Hannibal's skin.

Will heard Hannibal's breath catch in his throat at the admission. Without a word, Will brought his own hands up to cradle the heart with Hannibal, their fingers entwining.

A ragged sigh escaped Hannibal's lips as he leaned into Will's touch, his eyes closing in blissful surrender. "I live on you, Will," he whispered, his voice raw with emotion. "With an animal thirst that consumes me from the inside out." His words flowed like honey as he painted a vivid picture of the depths of his devotion. "I love you, Will, aš tave myliu, je t'aime, ti amo," he said.

Will moved forward to nuzzle Hannibal's temple, his own heart swelling with emotion. In that moment, nothing else mattered but the two of them.

But their moment of intimacy was shattered by the sound of voices ringing out, followed by the shattering of glass and the bright, blazing flame that erupted outside the window. Hannibal's grin was feral as he turned to face the source of the disturbance, his eyes alight with excitement.

"The trumpets have sounded," he said, his voice filled with anticipation. Will nodded in agreement, his own gaze fixed on the glowing light emanating from the saloon down the street.

Hannibal quoted scripture with a knowing smirk. "The third angel sounded his trumpet, and a great star, blazing like a torch, fell from the sky on a third of the rivers."

Will glanced around the room, his smirk mirroring Hannibal's as he said, "And the sea has turned to blood."

With a shared understanding, they rose to their feet, Hannibal dropping the heart to instead take Will's hand in his own.

As the flames licked the night sky, painting the town of Deadwood in a fiery glow, Will watched as Hannibal rode up to him on his new horse, the steed's powerful muscles rippling beneath its sleek black coat. The air was thick with smoke and the stench of burning wood, the crackling of flames echoing in the distance as the chaos of the burning town unfolded around them.

The prisoners traveled on horseback and wagon around them, their faces drawn with exhaustion and fear as they fled the inferno that consumed their prison. Will's entire body ached with fatigue, his muscles protesting with every movement as he sat astride his horse, his gaze fixed on the devastation before them.

He could feel the weight of the day's events pressing down on him, the blood of their enemies still staining his skin and clothes. They were both covered in filth and grime, in desperate need of a bath.

Hannibal steadied his horse next to Will's, his presence a comforting anchor. They watched the fire crackle together in silence, the flames casting dancing shadows across their faces as they reflected on the destruction they had wrought.

Will felt a sense of freedom wash over him, a weight lifting from his shoulders as he realized that they were no longer bound by the constraints of the town they had left behind. They could go anywhere in the world now, be anyone they wanted to be.

He could be the stoic cowboy, the boy from Louisiana, or the person he was only for Hannibal. He felt elevated, as if he had transcended the mortal realm and risen above the petty concerns of ordinary men.

As the flames danced and crackled, casting their warm glow over the charred remains of Deadwood, Hannibal's voice broke the silence with a murmur. "I have so much, and my feelings for her engulf it all; I have so much, and without her I find everything turned into nothing."

Will recognized the quote from Hannibal's book. He couldn't help but smile at the familiarity of the words, a bittersweet reminder of the complexities of Hannibal's heart.

"I still have it," Will said softly, his voice barely more than a whisper as he met Hannibal's gaze with a smile of his own. The firelight danced in his eyes, casting shadows across his face as he looked upon the man he had come to know so well.

Hannibal's gaze shifted from the fire to Will, a fondness shining in his eyes that took Will's breath away. He gasped quietly at the sight of him, the firelight casting a halo around Hannibal's head and turning him into a vision of divine beauty.

In that moment, Hannibal looked like a holy being, bathed in the warm glow of the fire, his features illuminated with an ethereal light. Will couldn't tear his eyes away, captivated by the sight of him, a living embodiment of all that was sacred, dark, beautiful, corrupt and pure.

It was moments like these that reminded Will of the depth of his feelings for Hannibal, a love that burned bright and fierce in his heart, consuming him from the inside out. In the flickering light of the flames, he saw the man he had come to love with a clarity that left him breathless, his soul laid bare before him like an open book.

Will allowed himself to drift into a daydream, a vision of a life that seemed almost too perfect to be real.

He again imagined them in Louisiana, their faces happy and smiling as they basked in the golden sunlight, the scent of magnolia blossoms hanging heavy in the air. They were like children again, playing in the cool waters of the bayou, their laughter echoing through the trees as they chased each other through the murky depths.

At night, they would read together by the light of the fire, the pages of their books illuminated by the dancing flames. And during the day, they would hunt, their senses sharp and attuned to the rhythms of the wilderness that surrounded them.

But it was in the early mornings that Will found himself most content, tangled up in Hannibal's arms as they made love beneath the canopy of trees, their bodies pressed together in a fierce embrace, their passion burning bright like the rising sun.

Will wanted to be twisted in Hannibal's hand like a length of rope, to teach the ways of the frontier to the man who was both poet and rough-and-tumble outlaw. He wanted to kiss Hannibal like a snapped guitar string, to taste the salt of his skin and the heat of his desire. He wanted to dream of his shoulders beneath the moonlight, the curves and contours of his body etched in the shadows.

Hannibal was his outlaw, the spur on his side that urged him forward into the unknown. With his poised posture and dust-coated clothes, he was a vision of rugged masculinity, a man born of the wild and untamed lands of the frontier.

And when the heat of the day became too much to bear, Will longed for nothing more than a dip in the cool waters of the creek, with Hannibal by his side, their bodies intertwined in a tender embrace that spoke of a love as deep and boundless as the endless expanse of the prairie. He wanted to to lose himself in the wild abandon of their love and never look back.

Hannibal tilted his head at Will, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. Will returned the smile, his eyes shining with a warmth that mirrored the firelight.

"You're beautiful," Will said softly, his voice barely more than a whisper as he looked upon Hannibal with a mixture of admiration and affection. Hannibal's smile widened at the compliment, his eyes sparkling with amusement as he regarded Will with fondness.

"And what now?" Hannibal asked, his tone tinged with curiosity as he waited for Will's response. Will's smile widened, his heart swelling with excitement at the prospect of what lay ahead.

"Well, partner, I'm headin' South," Will said, his voice firm and resolute. He clucked his tongue and turned to look in the distance, his eyes gleaming with determination. "And I reckon you're comin' with me."

Hannibal's smile widened at the invitation, his eyes alight with anticipation as he nodded in agreement. "Lead the way, dear cowboy," he said, his voice filled with a quiet confidence that sent Will's heart fluttering. "I will follow wherever you go."

Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will stood tall, a solitary figure with his weathered hat pulled low, shielding his eyes from the Louisiana sun. His rugged silhouette was cast against the backdrop of the shimmering waters, as he gripped his fishing rod firmly in calloused hands. The warmth of the sun caressed his face, a stark contrast to the cool breeze that danced across the creek, causing gentle ripples to form on the surface of the water.

In the quiet stillness of the early morning, Will surveyed the undulating patterns on the creek’s surface, a subtle dance orchestrated by the playful wind. The air carried a promise, a whisper of the day's potential, and Will harbored a singular hope—to catch a prized fish that would grace his dinner table come evening.

His bait bore the moniker of Hannibal, a name that resonated with a mythic promise. Legend had it that if the one you named your bait after held you in equal fondness, the waters would yield their bounty. Will chuckled to himself, a low, gravelly sound that echoed through the serene landscape. A smile played upon his lips, etched with the anticipation of a successful catch and the jesting promise of a conversation with Hannibal should the day prove fruitless.

As Will cast his line into the water’s embrace, his mind wandered back to the home he shared with Hannibal. A rustic cabin nestled amidst the untamed wilderness, where the aroma of freshly cut wood mingled with the fragrant scents of their flourishing garden. He envisioned Hannibal meticulously chopping vegetables with precision, a prelude to yet another masterpiece that awaited his return.

The image of Hannibal lingered in Will's thoughts—the way his partner's skin glistened with moisture from their shared morning bath, the tousled strands of wet hair framing a countenance that seemed to radiate an ethereal glow. In the sun's embrace, Hannibal appeared almost godlike, a manifestation of divine grace amid the natural world that surrounded them. Will couldn't help but contrast his own pale complexion, susceptible to the unforgiving rays of the sun, with Hannibal's radiant aura.

In the soft glow of the Louisiana morning, Will found himself standing by the water's edge, not as the stoic cowboy of the West, but simply as a man deeply in love. The warmth of the sun on his face seemed to echo the warmth that Hannibal's love brought to his heart.

Will mused on the notion that he really did possess a heart, a realization that seemed to dawn upon him in the quiet moments by the water every day. He acknowledged the foolishness of his love, recognizing that the mere gaze upon Hannibal could make him feel like a stumbling youth, unsteady on his own feet. It was a sentiment that left him both vulnerable and exhilarated, as if he had stumbled upon a hidden oasis in the vast desert of his existence.

Hannibal Lecter, with his charm and culinary prowess, had become the beacon that illuminated every hour of Will's life. In the midst of the Southern landscape, where life could be unforgiving and harsh as the West, Hannibal's love served as a sanctuary, a haven of comfort and acceptance.

As Will stood there, he couldn't escape the realization that time was a relentless force, marching forward with each passing day. His body bore the marks of a life spent traversing the West, a life that had aged him beyond the years of the wide-eyed youth he once was. Yet, here by the Louisiana water, surrounded by the symphony of nature, he found respite from the weariness that often accompanied his age.

The love that flowed between him and Hannibal transported Will to a state of perpetual youthfulness. The landscape around him seemed to mirror the innocence and purity of a twelve-year-old boy. He felt a lightness in his bones, a rejuvenation that defied the years etched into his features. In this moment, he could run for miles without a hint of fatigue, or he could rest for days without the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Bliss became the only word that echoed in Will's thoughts, a mantra that encapsulated the profound joy and contentment he found in the arms of Hannibal and the embrace of this idyllic setting. The worries of the world, the ache in his bones, and the passage of time all seemed to fade away in the presence of such pure and unbridled happiness.

Traveling to the South had indeed been a hard job, as Will had anticipated from the moment they left Deadwood behind. But despite the hardships they faced along the way, he had no

desire to turn back on his decision. The call of the South had been too strong to ignore, beckoning him onward with promises of new adventures and fresh beginnings.

The first days of their journey were the hardest, the long hours in the saddle leaving them falling asleep on their feet as they rode through the rugged terrain. Will could feel the exhaustion weighing heavy on his bones, threatening to drag him down into the depths of sleep with every passing mile.

There were moments when he feared he might never make it to their destination, his body screaming for rest and his mind clouded with fatigue. He had nearly drowned in the river they bathed in one evening, his weariness causing him to lose his footing in the rushing current and struggle for air as he fought against the pull of the water.

But despite the dangers and hardships they faced along the way, Will pressed on, driven by a determination to reach the South and start a new life with Hannibal by his side. There were days when they wouldn't come across towns for days on end, their stomachs growling with hunger as they struggled to find enough food to sustain them on their journey.

They hunted and foraged for what they could, their guns and knives their only companions in the vast wilderness that stretched out before them. They ate whatever they could find, whether it be game they had hunted themselves or the meager scraps they could scrounge up from the land.

There were days when the journey south tested the very limits of their patience, days filled with bickering and petty arguments over the smallest of things. Will and Hannibal found themselves at odds over trivial matters, their tempers flaring like dry tinder in the scorching sun.

But there were also days when their disagreements escalated into full-blown fights, days when the tension between them reached a boiling point and spilled over into violence. Will would push Hannibal too far, his words cutting like a knife as he lashed out in anger. And Hannibal, in turn, would probe Will's mind too damn deeply, delving into the darkest corners of his psyche with a relentless determination that bordered on cruelty.

They fought like animals, their fists flying and their knives flashing in the harsh light of day. They sparred with words as sharp as daggers, each seeking to wound the other with the

venom of their tongues. There were moments when it seemed as though they might tear each other apart, their rage consuming them like wildfire in the dry grass.

But through it all, they both knew that they would never truly harm each other, no matter how much they might want to in the heat of the moment. Deep down, beneath the anger and the resentment, there was a bond that bound them together—a love that ran deeper than any quarrel or disagreement could ever hope to break.

And so, when the dust had settled and the heat of their anger had cooled, they would come together once more, their wounds licked clean and their tempers tempered by the passage of time. They would kiss and embrace, their bodies pressed together in a silent apology for the harsh words and deeds of the day.

They would feed each other, sharing what little food they had and offering comfort in the midst of their shared hardship. And as they lay down to sleep beneath the blazing stars, the blistering heat of the sun fading into the cool embrace of night, they would find solace in each other's arms, knowing that no matter what the journey ahead might bring, they would face it together, as partners, as lovers, as two halves of a whole.

Will now reminisced about a bone-chilling night during the unforgiving winter months. The cold night in question had etched itself into Will's memory like the fine lines on an old map, marking a moment in time when the winter winds bit with a particular fierceness. The air was crisp, and the stars above glittered like diamonds strewn across the black velvet of the night sky. Will lay beside Hannibal, both bundled in layers of tattered wool and blankets, seeking warmth.

As Will stirred from his slumber, the telltale signs of Hannibal's distress reached his ears. The cowboy's eyes opened to the dim glow of the dying embers in the fire, casting flickering shadows across the ground. He turned his attention to Hannibal, whose once serene face was now contorted with fear and discomfort.

In that vulnerable state, Hannibal's defenses crumbled, revealing a softer side that Will rarely witnessed. The smugness, the calculated demeanor that usually adorned Hannibal like a well-tailored coat, had melted away in the face of some haunting dream. In the quiet of the night, Hannibal looked like a lost soul navigating the treacherous landscapes of his own subconscious.

The realization struck Will like a revelation – the man before him, so poised and self-assured in their waking hours, harbored a scared little boy within, a boy who had known loss and witnessed the world descend into madness. It was a poignant moment of connection, a glimpse into Hannibal's deepest fears and vulnerabilities.

The cowboy, despite the chill in the air, felt a warmth in his chest. He couldn't help but marvel at the contrast before him – the powerful man reduced to a trembling figure, stripped of the layers of sophistication and control. There was a tenderness in that moment that transcended the physical coldness of the night.

Will hesitated for a moment, contemplating whether to disturb the fragileness of Hannibal's sleep. But the whimpering and nonsensical words tugged at his heartstrings, compelling him to act. With a gentle touch, Will reached out to place a hand on Hannibal's shoulder, his calloused fingers offering a silent reassurance.

Hannibal's eyes fluttered open, revealing a momentary confusion before recognition settled in. The fear in his gaze softened as he met Will's steady eyes, a silent acknowledgment passing between them. In that exchange, Will saw not just the man he loved but the scared boy yearning for solace.

Drawing Hannibal closer, Will enveloped him in a comforting embrace, their bodies creating a shared cocoon against the winter's chill. The wind whipped around them, but within those blankets, a different kind of storm raged – the storm of memories, fears, and the scars that shaped Hannibal's soul.

As Hannibal whimpered and mumbled incoherent words, Will listened intently, his heart heavy with empathy. He spoke to Hannibal in a hushed tone, the words weaving love and reassurance. The language he chose was French, a tongue that danced with romance and held a familiarity for Hannibal, even in the throes of his subconscious distress.

"Je suis là, mon amour," Will murmured, his breath warming the space between them. "Tu es en sécurité. Je te protégerai toujours." ("I am here, my love. You are safe. I will always protect you.") The words, though foreign, carried a soothing cadence that transcended linguistic barriers. In that moment, the language of love became a sanctuary, a balm for the wounds that haunted Hannibal's dreams.

There were days when the vast expanse seemed endless, stretching far beyond the horizon, where the only company they encountered were the echoes of their own footsteps. But then there were other days, days when the silence was shattered by the distant murmur of men - strangers whose intentions were as unpredictable as the wind that swept across the plains.

As the sun dipped below the western skyline, casting long shadows upon the rugged terrain, Will and Hannibal found themselves trailed by the ominous presence of damn idiots. Men driven by desperation or malice, their motivations hidden behind dusty coats and sun-worn hats. The cowboy's hand instinctively rested on the hilt of his weather-beaten Colt, fingers tracing the grooves of familiarity as the tension in the air thickened.

The rhythmic clip-clop of hooves on hardened earth echoed in the quietude, an unsettling symphony that accompanied the duo on their journey. The strangers rode closer, their faces obscured by the fading light, creating an air of uncertainty that hung palpably in the dry, arid air.

The tension reached its zenith as the strangers drew near, their intentions veiled in the ominous silence. A standoff ensued, the wind carrying the unsaid words between the parties. Will's fingers twitched on the trigger of his gun, his gaze unwavering, while Hannibal's demeanor remained as composed as the landscape around them.

As Will wiped the blood from his hands after, he felt the familiar rush coursing through his veins. It was a sensation he knew all too well, one that filled him with a potent mixture of power and righteousness.

He thought back to the latest encounter, the adrenaline-fueled moments of violence that had left his heart pounding in his chest. There was a certain intimacy in the act of taking another's life, a rawness that he found both terrifying and exhilarating. Whether it was stabbing with his knife, shooting with his gun, or using his bare hands, each kill left its mark on him, searing itself into his memory.

But it was the close combat, the visceral struggle of hand-to-hand combat, that stirred something primal within him. The feeling of his fists connecting with flesh, the sound of bones breaking beneath his blows—it was a sensation unlike any other. In those moments, he felt alive in a way that nothing else could replicate.

Yet, as the adrenaline began to ebb away, Will was left with the aftermath of his actions. He felt the ache in his muscles, the throbbing pain of his own wounds. It was a harsh reminder of the violence he had unleashed, a stark contrast to the rush of excitement he had felt just moments before.

But he was not alone in his reverie. Hannibal was there, as he always was, tending to Will's wounds with a gentle touch and a steady hand. There was a sense of calmness in his presence, a reassurance that grounded Will even in the midst of chaos.

As Hannibal cleaned the blood from Will's wounds, his touch was tender, loving. It was a stark contrast to the brutality of the violence they had just inflicted upon their enemies. But to Will, it was a reminder that even in the darkest moments, there was still beauty to be found.

The fights against the walkers were brutal, each encounter a dance with death that left its mark on their souls. The cowboy and his mysterious companion had faced the relentless onslaught of the undead, their survival dependent on a seamless coordination of skill and instinct. It was a world where the line between life and death blurred with each passing day, a world where they had learned to adapt or perish.

The scarcity of walkers did little to diminish the ferocity of their encounters. When the undead did emerge from the shadows, the air became charged with a primal energy, a visceral reminder of the fragility of their existence. Will and Hannibal, bound by a shared fate, had narrowly escaped the gnashing jaws and grasping hands of the walkers, their struggles etched in the lines of exhaustion that adorned their faces.

They both bore the scars of those encounters, physical and emotional wounds that served as testament to the brutality of their existence. The close calls, the near bites that could have sealed their fates, were etched in the fabric of their shared history. Each battle was a lesson, a reminder that complacency could be a lethal companion in a world teeming with the remnants of a once-thriving civilization.

Yells and curses, exchanged in the heat of the moment, reverberated in the stillness that followed the skirmishes. Will and Hannibal, their breaths ragged and hearts pounding, would dissect the events that transpired, each critiquing the other's moves and decisions. It was a

ritual born out of necessity, a means to ensure that their survival depended not just on individual prowess but on the synergy of their partnership.

Meat, in those desolate times, became a commodity of necessity. The cowboy, once a man of some moral certitude, found himself facing a harsh reality where the distinction between right and wrong blurred like the dying embers of a campfire. The meat of their kills became sustenance, a means to stave off the relentless hunger that gnawed at their insides.

"It's fine," Will remarked one evening as they roasted the portions of meat over a crackling fire. The flames cast flickering shadows on his face, revealing a steely resolve in his eyes. "Meat is meat," he declared, his words echoing in the vast emptiness that surrounded them.

There were beautiful nights, too. Will and Hannibal found themselves lying side by side on the rugged ground, hands tightly entwined. The day had been grueling, filled with the relentless challenges posed by walkers and various hardships. The strains of their journey were etched into their faces, but beneath the weariness, there was a connection that transcended the trials they faced.

As they lay beneath the celestial tapestry, the stars overhead twinkled like diamonds scattered across the indigo canvas of the night. Will's calloused thumbs moved gently over Hannibal's knuckles, feeling the warmth and resilience in the touch. The cowboy's eyes met Hannibal's, and in the quietude of the night, the latter began to speak softly, his words weaving a tale that unfolded against the backdrop of the cosmos.

"Look up," Hannibal began, his voice a low murmur that blended seamlessly with the nocturnal symphony around them, "Cassiopeia was a queen in the realm of Perseus. She was known for her unparalleled beauty, a fact that drew the envy of the sea god Poseidon."

Will's gaze remained fixed on the stars, the images of the constellations taking shape in his mind as Hannibal continued his narrative. The vividness of Hannibal's storytelling, a talent he possessed like no other, painted scenes of mythology that rivaled the landscapes they traversed during the day.

"Cassiopeia's arrogance led her to boast about her beauty, claiming it surpassed even that of the sea nymphs. This angered Poseidon, and in his wrath, he sent a sea monster to terrorize

the kingdom. To appease the angered god, Cassiopeia and her husband, King Cepheus, were forced to sacrifice their daughter, Andromeda, to the monster."

The story unfolded with each carefully chosen word, and Will found himself captivated not only by the myth but also by the way Hannibal's voice carried a certain warmth and intimacy. Despite the harshness of their reality, there was a sense of solace in these moments of shared storytelling.

Hannibal's tale continued to unfurl, and Will, still gazing at the stars, began to imagine the characters and events described. The world around them seemed to fade away, leaving only the two figures on the ground, connected by the bond that had grown stronger with each passing day.

Even in the face of adversity, Will had never wavered in his faith. The challenges of their journey had only strengthened his resolve, deepening the connection between him and Hannibal. As Hannibal spoke, Will moved his gaze from the celestial display to Hannibal’s face.

Unable to resist the pull of the moment, Will guided Hannibal's hand above his face with a tenderness that felt unfamiliar. The touch was light, almost delicate, as he traced the lines and scars that told the story of Hannibal's turbulent past. These hands, capable of both destruction and tenderness, now moved gently over Will's features, bridging the gap between their histories.

Fingers, more elegant and longer than Will's own, explored the landscape of Will's face. The veins on Hannibal's hands, more prominent and defined, spoke of a life lived with purpose and conviction. Will felt the warmth radiating from those hands, hands that had wrought havoc and suffering, yet now cradled his face with a gentleness.

Hannibal turned, his eyes reflecting the silver luminescence of the moon, and he pressed his lips to Will's with a tenderness that transcended words. The kiss lingered, a language only they understood. When they finally parted, Will, still intoxicated by the moment, found himself compelled to voice the question that lingered in the depths of his soul.

"What do you see when you look at me?" Will asked, his voice a whisper that danced with the night breeze.

Hannibal sought to convey the ineffable beauty he found in Will. His gaze, intense and unwavering, held a depth that surpassed the star-lit heavens above.

"Mio caro," Hannibal began, his words a poetic symphony, "when I look at you, I see the untamed wilderness, a vast expanse of unexplored territories and hidden wonders. Your eyes, like the clear waters of a mountain stream, hold the reflections of a thousand untold stories, each ripple revealing a facet of your soul."

Hannibal's hands gently cradled Will's face, his touch a testament to the reverence with which he held the man before him. "Your flaws, my love, are like the rugged canyons that carve through the landscape – imperfect, yet they create a breathtaking panorama that captivates the heart. And when I kiss you, it's as if I taste the sweet nectar of wildflowers, a flavor that lingers on my lips and leaves me craving for more."

He paused, allowing the weight of his words to settle between them before concluding, "In you, Will, I find a beauty that transcends the tangible, a beauty that resides in the intangible essence of your being. You are a masterpiece painted by the hands of the divine, and with each passing day, my love for you grows like the boundless horizon that stretches beyond our sight."

In the quiet aftermath of Hannibal's poetic declarations, the night enveloped Will in a contemplative hush. The moon hung low, bearing witness to a love that defied the constraints of language. Will, a man of action rather than eloquence, found himself at a loss for words. The untamed wilderness surrounding them seemed to echo the silence, amplifying the intensity of the emotions lingering in the air.

As the night unfolded its tapestry of shadows, Will, driven by a primal yearning, sought to express the depth of his feelings in a language that transcended speech. He moved with a grace born from the rugged landscape that shaped him, hands tracing the contours of Hannibal's body.

With each touch, Will conveyed a silent devotion, a language written in the unexplored territories of skin and sinew. He pressed kisses upon Hannibal's flesh, places only the sun had witnessed, creating a sacred geography of shared intimacy. The moonlight painted a tableau

of whispered confessions, a love story etched in the secret places where only the night held sway.

In the silence of the clearing, broken only by the rustle of wind and the occasional nocturnal murmurings, Will's actions spoke for him. He kissed Hannibal's collarbone. His lips traced the lines of Hannibal's torso, a roadmap that told tales of resilience and unwavering strength.

As Will moved lower, his actions became a hymn to the sacredness of their connection. He worshipped Hannibal's body with a reverence that echoed through the ages, a cowboy's ode to a love as boundless as the frontier itself. Each kiss, each caress, was a silent affirmation of the emotions that stirred within him, a language unspoken yet profoundly understood.

Will poured his heart into the language of touch, hoping that Hannibal felt the resonance of their shared longing. And as he pressed his lips against Hannibal's skin, in places only the moon and stars had witnessed, Will hoped with every fiber of his being that the silent communion of their bodies spoke louder than any words could convey.

Now, with the triumphant tug on his fishing rod, Will felt the familiar resistance that signaled a catch. A smile crept across his face. The joy in his eyes mirrored the warmth of the Louisiana sun as he skillfully reeled in his prize. The fish, a sizable creature, flopped vigorously on the ground, a testament to Will's prowess in the art of angling.

As he examined the impressive catch, Will's grin widened. The anticipation of what culinary creation Hannibal would conjure with this bounty fueled his excitement. Thoughts of their shared meals, crafted with love and precision, filled Will's mind as he began the trek back to their home, the fishing rod slung over his shoulder.

The path back led Will through the quiet expanse of nature, the serenity broken only by the sounds of his footsteps and the occasional rustle of leaves in the gentle breeze. His home, a sanctuary nestled in the embrace of the landscape, stood proudly against the horizon. It was more than just a shelter; it was a testament to their joint efforts, a labor of love that had taken weeks to resurrect.

Will couldn't believe his luck that his childhood home still stood, a relic from the past that now served as the backdrop to their shared existence. Together, he and Hannibal had breathed

life back into the timeworn structure. Holes in the roof were patched, floorboards fixed, and new furniture crafted by their calloused hands.

In the sweltering heat, they had toiled tirelessly, hammering and sweating, forging a home. The sense of accomplishment in each nail driven and each board laid was a tangible manifestation of the love they poured into the restoration.

And yet, the hard work never felt like a burden. Not once did either of them complain as they transformed the dilapidated structure into a haven of comfort and warmth. The memories created during those sweat-soaked hours lingered, woven into the very fabric of their home.

The sun dipped low on the horizon, casting long shadows across the homestead as Will approached the porch. Hannibal sat there, engrossed in the pages of another book that Will had stumbled upon during their travels. A warm breeze played with the pages, and the rhythmic creaking of the wooden rocking chair filled the air.

A smile graced Will's face as he ascended the porch steps, a bounty of freshly caught fish cradled in his arms. The sight of Hannibal immersed in his reading, the sun setting behind him, felt like a tableau of the life Will had dreamed of but never dared to believe he could have.

"Hannibal," Will called, his voice carrying a lightness born of contentment.

Hannibal looked up from his book, the corners of his lips lifting in response to Will's presence. "Will," he greeted, closing the book and placing it beside him.

Will chuckled, the sound carrying the satisfaction of a successful catch. "Caught us a nice one this time. Took a damn while, though."

Hannibal rose from his rocking chair, the fading sunlight accentuating the contours of his face. "I'm sure it was worth the wait," he remarked, stepping closer to examine the fish.

A brief exchange of kisses followed. "This will pair nicely with the sweet potatoes," Hannibal remarked, a glint of culinary anticipation in his eyes.

"Good, I'm damn hungry," Will admitted with a grin, and together, they made their way into the cozy interior of their home.

In the kitchen, the atmosphere was infused with the scent of the day's harvest. Will set the fish on the counter, and Hannibal began orchestrating the creation of side dishes that bordered on artistry. The rhythmic clinking of utensils and the sizzle of ingredients in the pan created a symphony of domesticity.

As they sat down to eat, the table adorned with the fruits of their labor, Will couldn't help but groan in delight as he tasted the expertly cooked meal. "Damn, Hannibal, you're a miracle worker in that kitchen. Every time."

Hannibal's eyes sparkled with a mixture of pride and affection. "I aim to please, my dear Will. Your enjoyment is the greatest reward."

A comfortable silence settled between them as they savored the meal, exchanging smiles that spoke volumes. Eventually, Will cleared his throat, his thoughts turning to the future.

"Next time we go scavengin’," Will began, "we could look for some drawin’ supplies for you. I worry you might feel cooped up."

Hannibal's gaze met Will's, the warmth of understanding passing between them. "I don't feel cooped up, but art supplies would be a welcome addition," he admitted, a grateful smile playing on his lips.

The flickering candlelight cast a warm glow across the room as the evening settled into a comfortable stillness. Dinner had been savored, and now, with the strains of an imaginary tune lingering in the air, Hannibal rose from his chair, extending a hand toward Will. The cowboy, initially reluctant, let out a low groan but ultimately accepted the invitation, taking Hannibal's hand and reluctantly rising from his seat.

With a playful glint in his eye, Will intentionally stepped on Hannibal's feet as they began to sway to the rhythm of the nonexistent melody. A smirk played on his lips, mischief dancing in his gaze as he tried to disrupt the elegance of their dance. Hannibal, undeterred, continued to hum a soft tune, his movements guiding them gracefully across the room.

"Why do I have to be the woman in this damn dance every time?" Will grumbled, attempting to inject a note of complaint into the harmonious atmosphere. He half-expected a witty retort from Hannibal, but the man seemed wholly absorbed in the act of leading the dance.

Ignoring Will's protest, Hannibal simply continued to hum, his focus unwavering. The cowboy couldn't help but smile, finding amusement in the banter that accompanied their every interaction. The room seemed to shrink as they swayed, lost in their own private world.

"First, we begin with the basic waltz step," Hannibal explained, his voice gentle and patient. Will nodded, trying to focus as Hannibal demonstrated the movement. "Right foot forward, left foot to the side, close the right foot to the left," Hannibal continued, his movements elegant and precise.

Will attempted to mimic Hannibal's steps, stumbling slightly as he struggled to keep up. "Like this?" he asked, his brow furrowed in concentration.

Hannibal smiled reassuringly. "Yes, that's it," he replied, his voice soft. "Now, let's try it again, shall we?"

They continued to dance, Hannibal patiently guiding Will through each step as they moved gracefully across the room. Will stumbled occasionally, his movements awkward and uncoordinated, but Hannibal never once lost his patience.

"Remember to keep your posture straight and your movements fluid," Hannibal instructed, his voice gentle but firm. "You want to glide across the floor, not shuffle."

Will stumbled over his own feet, a deliberate misstep that brought forth laughter from both of them. The mirth filled the room, echoing off the walls like the sweetest melody. Hannibal, still guiding the dance, couldn't suppress a chuckle.

"Now, Will," Hannibal said, his tone carrying a blend of patience and amusement, "you really must pay attention to the steps. It is not that difficult, my dear."

Will feigned interest, nodding absently as Hannibal explained the dance steps for what felt like the millionth time. The cowboy's mind, however, wandered to the nuances of the moment – the warmth of Hannibal's hands, the soft hum of the imaginary tune, and the laughter that bound them together.

"I swear, Hannibal," Will quipped, "I could dance circles around the cattle back in the day, but this fancy footwork of yours just ain't my style."

Hannibal's response was a gentle smile, a knowing look that hinted at the pleasure he derived from these moments of shared amusement. They continued to sway, Hannibal leading with a grace that seemed to defy the constraints of the modest room.

The crackling fire cast dancing shadows across the rustic cabin’s living room as Will and Hannibal sat side by side, the glow illuminating the pages of a well-worn book. The air was thick with the aroma of burning wood, and the warmth of the flames mirrored the magnetic connection between the two men. It was a scene repeated many times, a routine that had become a cherished part of their shared existence.

Hannibal, with a refined air that contrasted with the rugged setting, patiently guided Will through the intricacies of reading. Will, though not as eloquent as his teacher, had made remarkable progress. His once stumbling and hesitant attempts now flowed with a rhythm that approached Hannibal's own command of language.

"Enunciate, Will," Hannibal advised, his voice carrying a measured cadence that befitted the tutoring session. "Each word deserves its own space, its own identity. Let the story unfold with the clarity it deserves."

Will nodded, absorbing Hannibal's instructions like a sponge. The leather-bound book rested in Will's hands, and he took a deep breath before diving into the world of Shakespearean drama. The flickering flames provided a gentle backdrop as the cowboy began to articulate the timeless words of "Romeo and Juliet."

"My bounty is as boundless as the sea," Will recited, his eyes scanning the lines before him. "My love as deep; the more I give to thee, The more I have, for both are infinite."

Hannibal, sitting beside him, listened intently, his discerning gaze focused on Will's progress. The seasoned teacher found pride in his student's growing proficiency, a testament to Will's determination to embrace the finer things in life, even amidst the challenges of their frontier existence.

A soft snicker escaped Will's lips as he continued reading, the words painting a vivid picture of Romeo's ardent declarations. Hannibal's disapproving tut echoed through the cabin, a subtle reminder that even in the realm of literature, opinions diverged.

"Romeo's behavior strikes you as amusing, Will?" Hannibal inquired, his tone carrying a mix of curiosity and mild reproach.

Will, not one to hold back his thoughts, chuckled before responding, "Damn idiot, if you ask me. He's rushin’ headlong into things, blinded by love. It's reckless, Hannibal."

The firelight danced in Hannibal's eyes as he regarded Will with a thoughtful expression. "Love often leads one down unexpected paths, Will. It can be both a guiding light and a treacherous abyss. Shakespeare captures the essence of human folly and passion in his words."

Will ignored him in favour shifted closer to Hannibal, drawn to the magnetic warmth of his side. The cowboy leaned into the embrace, cuddling closely with a contented sigh.

The night had deepened, and the crackling warmth of the fire had given way to the quiet embrace of their modest cabin. The worn wooden floor beneath them groaned and creaked under the combined weight of Will and Hannibal as they retired to bed. It was a familiar

symphony, one that echoed the countless nights they had spent together under the vast expanse of the Southern sky.

In the dim glow of the lantern, they nestled close, their bodies finding solace in the proximity. The soft rustle of blankets and the muted crackle of the dying embers created a lullaby that serenaded them into the quiet realm of sleep. As they lay entwined, the cowboy listened to the rhythmic cadence of Hannibal's heart beneath his chest, a steady beat that echoed the comfort and familiarity of their shared existence.

The dreams came to Will like a gentle breeze, whispering fragments of a past that seemed both distant and intimately close. In the realm of slumber, he found himself transported to a time when the weight of the world had yet to burden his young shoulders. The vivid hues of childhood memories painted his dreamscape, a respite from the horrors he had witnessed throughout his tumultuous life.

He found himself in a small town, the dusty streets echoing with the laughter of children and the occasional clip-clop of horse hooves. Will, now a wiry frame of youthful exuberance, moved through the dreamlike streets, a carefree grin on his face. Beside him, Hannibal, a boy as well yet still a figure of maturity ten years his senior, walked with an air of quiet authority.

Their hands were joined, fingers interlaced in a gesture that spoke of a bond deeper than the passage of time. The radiant glow of the bayou surrounded them, its ethereal illumination casting a warm sheen on their faces. The air was filled with the rhythmic hum of crickets, and the symphony of the night seemed to harmonize with the melody of their shared footsteps.

As they strolled through the glowing bayou, memories of firefly-lit nights flooded Will's dream. The flickering lights danced like ephemeral stars, casting a magical aura over the landscape. Hannibal's presence beside him was a constant, a reassuring anchor in the sea of memories that unfolded.

In the dream, they were boys again, their laughter ringing out like a melody in the warm night air. They reached a quiet clearing, bathed in the gentle glow of moonlight filtering through the Spanish moss-draped trees. Hannibal's eyes held a wisdom that surpassed his years, yet there was a spark of playful mischief that resonated with Will's own youthful spirit.

As they walked hand in hand, a soft laughter echoed around them, a sound that tugged at the edges of Will's consciousness. He recognized it instantly – the laughter of a little girl. Mischa. In the dream, she materialized like a phantom, her presence woven into the very fabric of their nostalgia.

Mischa's laughter intertwined with the firefly-lit dreamscape, creating a tapestry of warmth and belonging. Will's heart swelled with a bittersweet emotion as he watched her, a spectral presence that embodied the innocence they had lost along the rugged trails of their existence.

The early morning light filtered through the timeworn curtains, casting a warm, golden glow across the room. The familiar sound of birdsong filled the air, a sound that accompanied the rising sun. Will stirred from his slumber, the soft rays kissing his face, and he couldn't help but grin as he took in the tranquil scene.

Turning to his side, he found Hannibal still lost in the embrace of sleep. His silvery hair tousled, Hannibal looked disarmingly soft, a stark contrast to the composed facade he wore during their waking hours. Will couldn't resist the urge to move, shifting to settle himself over Hannibal with a quiet determination.

As Will leaned down to press a slow and tender kiss upon Hannibal's lips, the older man stirred, his eyes fluttering open. A languid smile graced Hannibal's features as he met Will's gaze, still heavy with the remnants of dreams. "Good morning," he murmured, the words a soft caress that hung in the air.

Hannibal's hands, warm and possessive, traced a leisurely path over Will's bare torso, exploring the contours of muscle and the terrain of raised scars. Will shivered under Hannibal's touch, a response that spoke of both vulnerability and trust.

The kiss between them deepened, a slow dance of lips and tongues that conveyed a language only they understood. Will couldn't help but groan softly as he felt the friction between their bodies. The morning held a sacred stillness, a moment suspended in time where the world outside their cocoon ceased to exist.

In the hushed intimacy of the morning, Will allowed his hips to tilt over Hannibal's, the subtle pressure eliciting a low, guttural sound from both men. It was a dance of desire, a

rhythm that echoed the beating of their hearts, a cadence that spoke of a union that went beyond the physical.

As their mouths continued to explore each other, the room filled with a palpable tension, a magnetic pull that drew them closer. Hannibal's fingers traced the lines of Will's body, lingering over scars that bore witness to the trials they had faced together. Each touch was a silent acknowledgment of the shared history etched into their very beings.

For Will, these stolen moments in the morning were his favourite. It was a time when the world outside their shared space seemed to fade away, and all that remained were the two of them, entangled in a dance of passion and intimacy. The worries and hardships of the day had yet to cast their shadows, leaving the dawn as a canvas upon which they painted their shared desire.

Will groaned softly into the kiss, the intoxicating blend of sensations and emotions swirling between them. His tongue explored the recesses of Hannibal's mouth with a familiarity that spoke of countless mornings spent like this, a ritual that bound them together in a world that often sought to tear them apart.

These moments were a refuge, a sanctuary where they could revel in the freedom of each other's touch without the weight of the world on their shoulders. In the soft morning light, they were free from the struggles and battles that defined their days, lost in the simple yet profound act of being together.

Will's mischievous grin betrayed his intentions as his hand descended, retrieving their hardened cocks. With a playful glint in his eye, he brought both together, cupping them in his hands and pressing them against his palms.

Hannibal, beneath Will, writhed ever so slightly, his lips seeking the warmth of Will's. In the sweet chaos of lust and desire, he kissed every inch of Will's face, his murmurs of Will's name becoming a mantra that echoed in the quietude of the room. Will, spurred by the heady mix of pleasure and playfulness, quickened his movements, a fervent dance that left both of them breathless.

As Hannibal's teeth latched onto Will's neck, a shiver ran through the cowboy's frame, a groan escaping his lips. Words spilled from Will's mouth in an unrestrained babble,

declarations of Hannibal's perfection and the exquisite pleasure that coursed through them. Will knew Hannibal enjoyed the verbal outpouring, and in the intimate space they shared, there was no need for restraint.

Their cocks, now pulsing with their orgasms, elicited simultaneous shudders from both men. Will, breathing raggedly, rolled off Hannibal, choosing to rest his head on the man's shoulder. Sticky with come, they lay side by side, bodies tangled in a sweet aftermath that defied the conventions of the outside world.

Hannibal's voice, a soft murmur in the stillness, broke the quietude. "I will never tire of waking like this," he confessed, his fingers tracing lazy patterns on Will's back.

A chuckle escaped Will's lips, the sound carrying the lightness of shared joy. "Me too," he replied, his own hand finding Hannibal's in a reassuring gesture.

Will gazed up at Hannibal, his piercing blue eyes fixed upon the man who held his heart. The rhythmic sound of wind swaying against the trees provided a backdrop to the intimate moment shared between the two, a moment painted with the hues of the sun.

Hannibal's eyes, closed in a moment of serene bliss, revealed a subtle smile that curled at the corners of his lips. As the sunlight played upon his features, Will felt the warmth of the world beaming at him, an ethereal connection to the vastness of the earth and the heavens above.

In the quietude moments like these, a realization dawned upon Will – a recognition of the all-encompassing nature of the emotions that bound him to Hannibal. A profound understanding that he would willingly kill for Hannibal or face the prospect of being killed by him. The very thought brought a sense of bliss that transcended the realm of conventional morality.

The sun, a radiant orb sinking into the horizon, mirrored the fire that burned within both Will and Hannibal. The cowboy couldn't help but marvel at the intensity of the emotions that surged through them, an inferno that defied reason. Hannibal, in that moment, became the embodiment of gold, a precious and dangerous allure that drew Will deeper into the flames.

The scorching skin of Hannibal's heart, Will mused, was both a source of warmth and a potential source of pain. He understood that Hannibal was not safe to love, that the path they treaded was fraught with danger. Hannibal's hands, capable of both tenderness and brutality, left marks on Will's skin – bruises that adorned his body like badges of honor.

Yet, despite the risks, Will found himself captivated by the allure of Hannibal's essence. The sun inside Hannibal raged like wildfire, a force of nature that could set a kingdom ablaze. Will accepted this truth, embraced it even, as he acknowledged the unpredictable and tempestuous nature of their love.

Hannibal, now bathed in the warm glow of the sun, embodied the dichotomy of beauty and danger. His maroon eyes, when open, held a captivating intensity that spoke of a mind that navigated the complexities of the world with both grace and ruthlessness. The lines etched on his face told a story of a life lived with purpose and a heart that beat with a ferocious passion.

The cowboy, undeterred by the shadows that lingered beneath the surface, made a silent vow to face the flame that Hannibal represented. His love for the man transcended the fear of getting burned, for in the ashes, Will believed, they would find a truth that could not be extinguished.

The morning light filtered through the worn curtains, casting a soft glow upon the rustic room where Will and Hannibal shared a moment of quiet intimacy. The air hung heavy with the anticipation of the day ahead, a day that would demand they confront the harsh realities of their existence - scavenging through abandoned towns, facing dangers that lurked in the shadows.

Will, with a contented smile, leaned down to kiss the corner of Hannibal's mouth, a fleeting gesture that spoke volumes of the intimacy they shared. As Hannibal nuzzled into the covers, Will reached to the sidetable, his fingers grazing over the cool surface until they found the familiar shape of his hat.

Plopping the hat on his head with a practiced motion, Will felt a surge of determination coursing through him. Today was a day for scavenging, for venturing into the remnants of abandoned towns and facing the dangers that lurked in every shadow. The life they led was one of constant peril, a precarious dance with the face of danger. Will knew the routine well, the necessity of scavenging for supplies to survive in a world that had crumbled around them.

As he stood at the precipice of another day, Will couldn't ignore the nagging thought that this life might not be sustainable. The echoes of the past, the remnants of a world that once thrived, were now replaced by desolation and decay. The cowboy, his gaze lingering on Hannibal's form, knew that they might have to leave one day, abandoning the remnants of their makeshift home.

"Not all those who wander are lost," Hannibal had said once, his words carrying a weight of truth that resonated with the cowboy. It became a mantra, a reminder that their nomadic existence was not necessarily a path of aimless wandering but a journey with purpose, a quest for survival and meaning.

With a smile that held both determination and affection, Will turned to face Hannibal, who had nestled into the covers. The stoic facade Hannibal wore, the man with no emotions who killed without mercy, could not completely mask the vulnerability that existed beneath the surface. Will knew that behind the mask, there was a man who had found solace in the bond they shared, a man who was more than just the sum of his actions.

Hannibal's eyes met Will's, and for a fleeting moment, the vulnerability in those dark depths was laid bare. It was a silent acknowledgment, a shared understanding that transcended words. Will, always the stoic cowboy in the harsh reality they navigated, found comfort in the knowledge that he would never be lost, not as long as he had Hannibal by his side.

Will fastened his gun belt, the weight of the holster a familiar presence against his hip. The hat, now a symbol of both practicality and identity, shielded his eyes from the harsh sun as he prepared to face the challenges that lay ahead. But even as he embraced the stoic exterior required by their harsh world, the warmth of Hannibal's gaze lingered in his thoughts.

Every day, Will yearned for the closeness that allowed him to reside in the marrow of Hannibal's soul. The love between them felt like doves and river water – pure, graceful, and sustaining. And as Will whispered those three simple words - "I love you" - he couldn't help but feel that the enormity of the world could be created out of the simplicity of five vowels and three consonants.

As the cowboy embraced the rituals of their morning, he pondered the depth of his connection with Hannibal. It was a connection that transcended the tangible, something he

could recognize by touch alone, by smell. Even blind, he would know Hannibal by the way his breaths came and his feet struck the earth. He knows him even at the end of the world.

The wooden door creaked open, and Will stepped into the crisp morning air. His boots echoed against the wooden porch as he walked towards the sturdy figure of his horse, patiently waiting by the hitching post. With practiced ease, Will mounted his horse. As he urged the horse forward, the animal rose into the air, carrying Will towards the town on the horizon.

Chapter End Notes

Little reference to Achilles and Patroclus at the end. :3 Thank you lovely people for reading! This was such a pleasure to write. I hope you guys fell in love with these characters as I did. I'll miss these boys so much! 💘💘 I'm on tumblr @cervviidae :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!